Isaac Asimov THE THREE WHO DIED TOO SOON

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY

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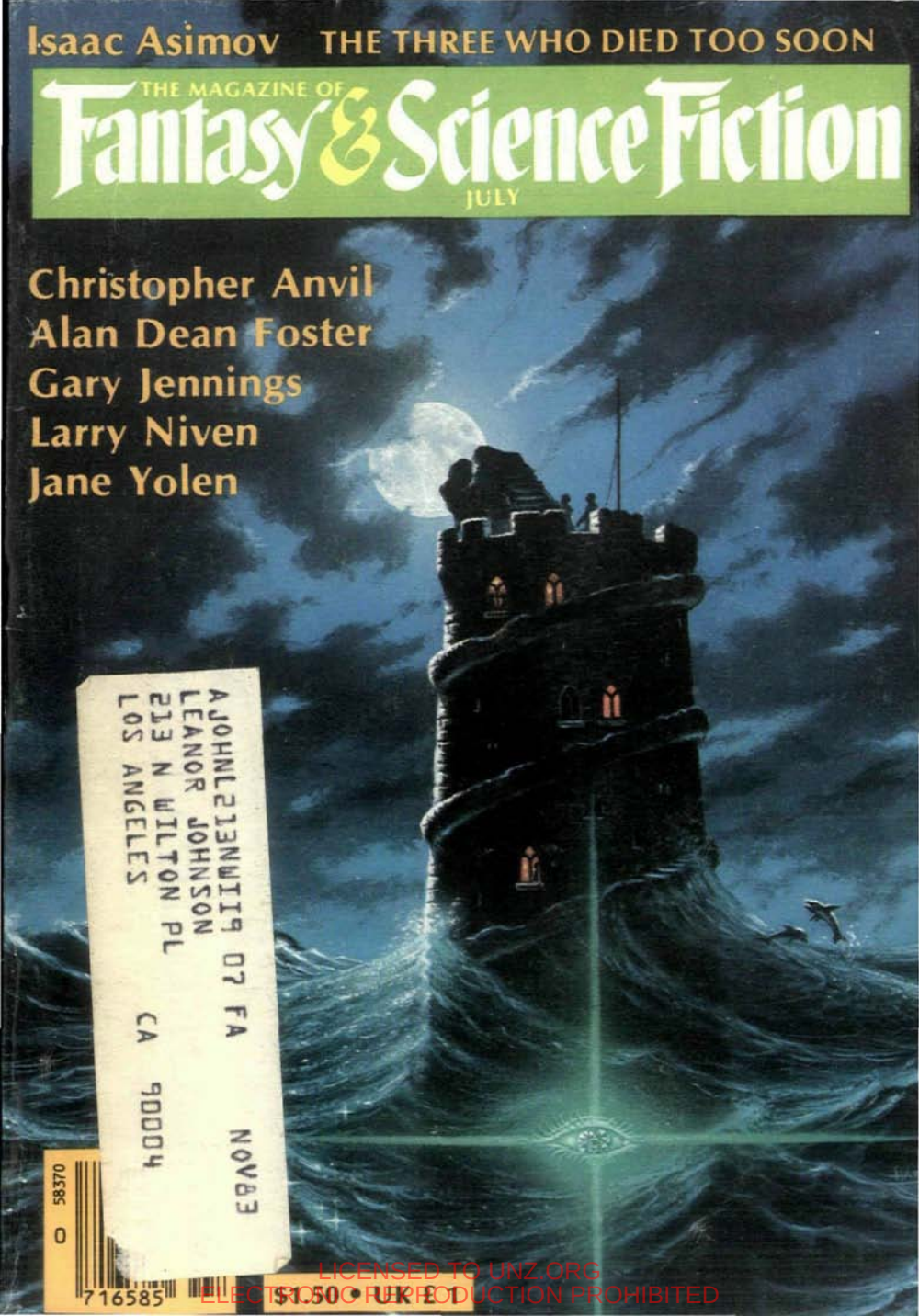

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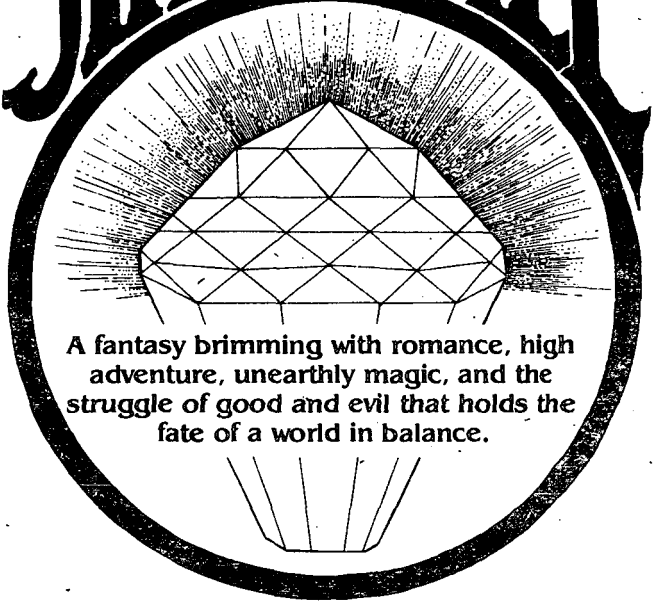

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JULY • 33rd Year of Publication

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Garry Kilworth ("Almost Heaven," February 1982) returns with a tale about a bizarre quest in the Far East, an adventure story with a certain "Raiders of the Lost Ark" quality to it.

Blind Windows

BY

GARRY KILWORTH

Quinlan's eyes were full of anger. "Do you know what the hell time it is?"

"Yes," I said. "August."

Although I had not been aware of it, I had come to the Far East to escape precision. As I stood on the bustling Bangkok pavement, drinking a long, iced glass of orange, I realized what it was that I loved about the East. No one really cared whether their quartz watches were three nanoseconds out of phase with some definitive atomic clock. The desire for exactitude which permeated through to every aspect of a Westerner's life seemed abhorrent here. Nobody really cared ... except Quinlan. So, usually being at peace with myself, if not with the world, I was never fully prepared for the agitation with which Quinlan was constantly charged.

"You were supposed to meet me here at eight," he accused. I had forgotten our appointment.

He was right, and I wanted to apologize, but I found it difficult when I was under attack. Quinlan was a tall, morose character, an Australian freelance correspondent and adventurer, with some undefined purpose behind his wanderings. He had remained in the East after Vietnam, but unlike me he had little money, which seemed a constant source of bitterness to him. We tolerated each other's society simply because we were two Caucasians adrift in a sea of Asiatics. At home we would have avoided each other. I know he envied me because of my resources and the fact that I could go home, or anywhere, whenever I wished. He was ten years older than I. I disliked him, and was afraid of him, because he seemed a little psychotic — brooding, intense and contemptuous

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of any form of authority. His thin face, usually carrying the sparse beginnings of a beard, held a pair of dark eyes that were never still. It was as if he expected to be assassinated at any moment. Despite being in awe of him, I respected him. He had been into Cambodia, at a time when visitors were more than discouraged, and had returned with his head still firmly on his shoulders. Two Canadians who went with him were caught, by one side or the other, and tortured to death slowly, over a period of three days. Quinlan had witnessed the murder from a hiding place, unable to do anything to help. I found myself a rickety chair at the pavement cafe and sat down. Quinlan hovered for a few seconds and then joined me.

"Well, where were you?"

I forced my attention away from the passing faces, and focused on his belligerent expression.

"I'm sorry. I forgot our appointment. Naline did remind me earlier but ..." I shrugged. "It's this place. There's so much going on." It had been my girl Naline who had introduced me to Quinlan. She had met him several days before me, at a party thrown by the Bangkok newspaper she worked for.

He stared at me for a full fifteen seconds, and for a moment or two I thought he was going to hit me. Then his thin face registered a look of resigned disgust and he sat down opposite. He put his feet on the edge of the table and tipped back in his chair.

"Christ," he said, explosively, looking straight into my eyes. It was one of these stares which, on the receiving end, was almost painful. I averted my own face.

"Trouble is," he said, "I need you. I need your ... money."

"At least you're forthright about it. A little blunt-and tactless perhaps...."

The money had been a gift — no, a bribe — from my father. He had intended that I use it to start a business in the United Staes, but when he died in London a year after my course at UCLA had ended, I skipped out of the States before my mother could contact me. They had been separated for ten years, and neither had wanted me around.

"Oh, you'll get it back. Tenfold," Quinlan said, suddenly leaning forward, his eyes only inches from mine. "I need a stake, Andy."

"What for?"

"I need you to finance an expedition. Christ, not a lot. Just some equipment and provisions. Well within your means, believe me. Trouble is, I need it soon, and...."

"Collateral?" I queried.

His expression hardened again. For a few moments his enthusiasm had driven out the bitterness.

"None. You'll have to trust me."

"I thought so. Where is it?"

"Where's what?" he seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Wherever it is you're going. I might want to come too."

He smiled, amused. "Doubt it. It's in Cambodia."

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Cambodia. Immediately, the name conjured visions of green foliage folded in upon itself, many times. Shelves, layers of thick jungle. Underneath, dark, moody rivers, belly-sliding quiet as snakes through the undergrowth. Ruined temples, their stones torn apart by the vegetation. Then there were the man-made horrors. Skulls of massacred peasants piled into small hills. Horror stories manifested in the grotesque shapes of tortured bodies. Brains like dried paste upon rocks.

"I've been there," I said, stiffly.

"I mean alone. Not safely closeted inside a ring of soldiers."

"If it's my money you want, then I go with it," I replied. I meant it. Thailand was good for my soul but my body was deteriorating fast with all the abuse it received. It needed exercise and I needed excitement. Besides, Cambodia was relatively quiet now.

"And Naline," I added. "She goes too." (Naline had primed me before I left that morning. "Quinn will be offering you a business deal," she had said. "It involves a journey. I'd like to come as well." Her forehead would crease into a tiny frown when she was being earnest, and her small Oriental mouth would purse into a bud. I found her irresistible.)

He smirked. "You've caught something there. It's a nasty infection."

"What?"

"Love. It's an illness, worse than typhoid. Okay, okay, don't get mad," he said, as I felt myself reddening with annoyance. "I guess I'll have to take you both. Can you climb? Mountains, I mean."

"You know I can. I told you ... at the party the other night. The German Alps and Canadian Rockies ... and in Cambodia," I added, after a pause. The insult regarding the army escort still smarted.

"Right. I remember ... but you were stoned at the party. I wanted to be sure because there'll be no turning back once we've started. What about her? Naline?"

"She'll be okay. She's been climbing with me a couple of times."

"Do yourself a favor. Just lend me the money. If anything happens to either of you, I'm not turning back or stopping."

"We're coming," I said, determined.

Quinlan stared at me for a full minute, then said, "Right. I'll be here at nine tomorrow morning. Try and be here on time. It's not that difficult. All you have to do is look at your wrist."

I showed him the white mark where my watch had been, and he shook his head impatiently. "Well, for Christ's sake, ask somebody." Then he stood up and left, weaving his way between the stream of pedestrians. I sat and finished my drink before going to meet Naline. She was a beautiful Indo-Chinese girl, raised in Hong Kong. I met her on a climbing expedition in Cambodia about two years before coming to Thailand. She had been the official photographer for the Hong Kong spon-

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sors. Quinlan was right about one thing — I was crazy about her.

I had to admit to being intrigued. Who can resist hints of buried treasure or the capture of some fabulous beast? Certainly not me. I am more susceptible than the next man to romantic visions and adventure. We began buying goods in accordance with lists he had already made out. There was food and hunting weapons, but the majority of purchases consisted of climbing equipment: robes, pitons, hammers.

Lastly, and with the greatest difficulty, we bought the miners' helmets, complete with integral lamps and heavy backpacked batteries.

"Mines," I said, eagerly trying to remember what precious minerals came out of Cambodia. Gold? Silver? Quinlan merely smiled at me.

"No transmitter?" I said later, I must confess a little anxiously.

"Who do you think's going to come and get us if we get into trouble. The U.N.?"

"What about if we get stuck halfway up a mountain?"

"Then we get ourselves down. Look, believe me, Andy." He always called me by my first name. I didn't even *know* his. "A radio would be no good to us. It'll only get us into trouble."

"Give our position away to terrorists, you mean?"

"Terrorists, or anyone. Who's a friend in the jungle? Some people I knew once sailed too close to the coast. They were on their way to Thailand, here, to buy teak for a new deck for their yacht. They were intercepted and fatally tortured by the *authorities.* Look, Andy, if you...."

"I'm coming," I said, grimly.

"Suit yourself, but we do it my way."

The last purchase was a battered old Landrover. That night Quinlan spent smoking hash, since, he said, he never got stoned when he needed his wits. I found a bottle of brandy somewhere and cuddled it all the way to Naline's place. Naline means Lotus Flower in Hindi, but to me she was more like some dark, mysterious orchid, with her black hair and fathomless eyes full of archaic secrets. I needed her more than I needed my brandy.

Next morning was as sultry as any other. The air in the room lay heavy and damp on my naked chest. I rose and showered, for all the good it would do me, and urged Naline to follow me through. We met Quinlan as prearranged, by Thieves' Market. We were half an hour late.

Quinlan was in the Landrover's driving seat and gunning the engine impatiently. Naline and I joined him quickly and he smacked it into gear and tore out of the market place in a pique. I was getting used to Quinlan's tempers, though I guessed he always had them well under control despite

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what any onlookers may have thought. I believed much of it was an act. I suspected he enjoyed the role-playing, especially with an audience like myself and Naline.

The hard-dust roads seemed endless. Finally, several days out, we reached a point where we would have to go on foot. We abandoned the vehicle, hiding it by a waterfall, but we doubted it would still be there when we came back. I thought I had sweated out my soul in Bangkok. In the undergrowth the humidity was ten times worse. Within minutes there wasn't a dry patch on any of our jungle fatigues. I could hardly breathe, the air was so dense with moisture. It was as damp, dark and stifling as the inside of a haystack.

The entangled foliage made the going difficult, and we took narrow paths wherever possible but kept clear of roads, crossing them quickly whenever we had to. If you've ever been in the jungle, you'll know that it's like being in a sauna crammed full of plants. Only the walls are made of tree trunks and the roof of thick, waxy leaves. The heavy air is alive with slow, dull-witted insects which fly into your mouth, ears and eyes, and all around you the disembodied calls of formless beasts follow your progress.

Quinlan spent most of his time poring over his compass and the maps: greasy-looking, weathered scraps of linen covered in sweat stains. At night we slept in a tight triangle. I say *slept* but I hardly closed my eyes. I have never been so afraid in my life: every tiny leaf rustling was man or carnivore on its way to my throat. There were too many unidentifiable sounds in the jungle. Strangely enough, Naline seemed the least concerned of the three of us. Perhaps she had an unfounded faith in our ability to protect ourselves. Or possibly she had a courage which shielded her outward appearance. Certainly she never seemed the least afraid. Once, she remarked to me, "You know, I always thought Quin would be at home in the jungle because he's so out of place in the city. But he doesn't fit in either environment, does he?"

"He's one of life's misfits, all right."

"And you," she said, her dark narrow eyes on my face, "in town you're different," which was a kind way of saying she recognized that, in town, I had my wallet. Her voice held a faint note of contempt.

We had been six days in the jungle when something happened which turned the journey into a nightmare for me. We were walking close to a hidden stream when I felt something snatch at my jungle fatigues. As I looked down, there was a sudden flurry in the long grass. I never saw what bit me.

Feverishly, I pulled up my trouser leg. My skin had been pierced just above the boot top.

Naline and Quinlan had walked on ahead, unaware of what had happened.

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"Quin!"

He turned with a puzzled frown on his brow.

"What?" Then, "Why are you sitting down?"

I tried to keep my voice calm, but there was a tremor there which I could not quell.

"I think I've been bitten ... a snake."

"You think ...?"

"I have. It got me on the ankle."

He was very quick. Our first-aid kit had serum but there were many different kinds of snake. Quinlan cut my leg and made an effort to suck at the wound, but it was technically an amateurish operation. He was merely doing what he *thought* was the right thing to do. He gave up after a minute or two.

Naline injected me with a general serum and then stood back and observed me. There was no pain, but I was scared. I wanted to get up and run for my life. I fought the panic.

"You'll have to help me get back," I said, aware that my fright was making my heart race. They exchanged significant looks, and Quinlan said, "We can't go back now. We've come too far. The best thing to do is lie still. Moving will only ensure the poison reaches your heart and brain more quickly."

"You could carry me on a stretcher."

"No chance. We'd never make it in time — and the expedition would be a failure," he added, coldly.

"Fuck the expedition!" I shouted. "I could be dying." I climbed to my feet and tested my leg. Naline began taking photographs of me.

"Cut that out," I screamed at her. "I'm not a side show." She chewed her lip and frowned, "Sorry," she said, quietly. "It was a reflex action. Quin's right though, Andy. I couldn't carry you ... too heavy for me."

"We'll just have to hope for the best", said Quinlan, and that was the sum total of the psychological comfort I was going to get from either of my companions. For one whole day we remained where we were, procrastinating for no sensible reason. Maybe it was sympathy on their part, and dilatory maneuvers with an acceptance of death, on mine. Nothing happened. I developed no feverish symptons or pains in the chest, and finally we decided that the snake was nonpoisonous. We moved on at dawn, the second morning after. Quinlan remarked, when it was clear that I was going to be all right, that he had never understood the rationale behind the creation of creatures with a defensive weapon that, when used, still gave the victim adequate time to kill. I replied that perhaps the knowledge that it could be fatal was enough. What *I* had never understood, if these things were *meant* to fit within a pattern of order and not chaos, was why many of them were capable of overkill. There were creatures carrying enough poison to stop

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the heart of an elephant in places where the largest animal was the size of a dog.

Before we broke camp I noticed a thin red line running up from the teeth marks on my leg, following a vein. I said nothing to the others.

Three days later we reached a small clearing where Quinlan paused. "This is where Rice and Baker died," he said.

The Canadians.

"Christ!" I looked around me nervously.

Quinlan stoood there a long time, just staring. I muttered something like, "Let's get going," and he turned on me.

"You know what happened here?" he cried.

"Keep your voice down," I urged. "Yes, I know. You told me." Naline was looking from one to the other of us, her eyes narrowed.

"What I didn't tell you was that while they had those two staked out over beds of bamboo knives, I had to belly-crawl to get the charts."

I was horrified. "You took them while they were dying?"

"There was no other way. I couldn't help them. The place was thick with bandits. It took me two nights to get up enough sweat to crawl out to them. What did you want me to do? I had to watch those two guys being roasted afterwards. They were my friends, for God's sake." His black lank hair hung over those restless eyes, and something was squeezing my windpipe, making my breath whistle softly. I turned away and busied myself with my pack until I had regained control of my emotions. When I turned around again, Naline had her hand on his arm. He was shaking violently. "You'll be all right, Quin," she said.

Later, he talked more rationally about his reasons for needing the maps and charts.

"Without them, we'd never find the place we're looking for," he said.

"What is this thing we're looking for?" asked Naline. "Come on, Quin, you tell us now. We must be close."

Had it been I who asked, Quinlan would probably have ignored me. Instead he said, "Sure. You've got a right to know. Now." We were sitting round a small fire, risking the smell of woodsmoke reaching the nostrils of bandits. We weren't worried about anyone spotting the flames, since we were completely shrouded by a canopy of interlacing tree branches and surrounded by foliage: we were enclosed within a basket of jungle weave. Nearby a waterfall roared continuously. Naline called it a *stonewater-dragon*. It wasn't difficult to walk right into those hanging jaws with their silver teeth, in the density of the undergrowth. "Now we're on high ground, I'll tell you." His eyes seemed to glow with excitement. "We're looking for the fourth primary."

I looked at him, not in amazement, but in utter bewilderment.

"A new color," he explained. "Only three primary pigment colors are

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known to man. It's possible this may be the fourth."

He was crazy. I should have realized all along that Quinlan was completely out of his mind. And was looking at *me*, as if *I* were the biggest dodo he had ever had the misfortune to pair up with.

"What's this color like?" I asked, tentatively. My leg was hurting badly by this time. I had tried to clean it but the wound kept festering. It was not snake poison, but good old-fashioned septicemia. All this for a madman.

"How the hell can I describe a color you've never seen? All I can say is, it's not yellow, red or blue. I haven't even seen it myself — but it's there."

He launched into two or three scientific-sounding explanations which might account for a new color, even improbable (I would have said impossible) theories for a new primary pigment involving half-wave lengths and mixtures of wave lengths, until I asked him to stop.

"I don't understand a word," I said, irritably. "For all we know, it could be supernatural effusion." I was trying to be sarcastic, but Naline said, "That too, maybe." Quinlan smiled at me. So she was on his side? They were both of them insane, and I was stuck with them until he showed me the way back.

"What form is it in?" I said.

"Good question, but I don't know that either. I guess perhaps minerals," replied Quinlan.

I said, "What are you going to do with it?"

Naline smiled at Quinlan. "I can tell you that. Anything and everything. I can imagine the value of a new cosmetic for women. Or ornaments ... figurines. A new color ... It'll be worth a fortune."

"What if it's in the form of a crystal," I said, quickly and stupidly. "You won't be able to mold it into shapes."

"Are you *kidding?*" Quinlan said. "If it's crystal, we're rich beyond measure. A rare crystal of a previously unknown color. Hell!"

His eyes shone with lunacy. The *fourth primary*. Crazy. Crazy. After a few moments they both began laughing, first Naline, then Quinlan. Whatever this thing was, Quinlan cried, it would be marketable. Even a dead flower could be encased in plastic or fiber glass in order to retain its color. They danced around the trees while oblivious of the danger we might be in, laughing themselves silly. Then they hugged and kissed each other, and me, in between fits of hysterics. I remember thinking at the time that she held onto Quinlan longer than necessary but then dismissed the thought. How long was necessary? Who was I, who hated timescales, to question the length of a hugging period? They were both intoxicated with pictures of our futures and I admit it was infectious. When the giggling had died, I calmly asked how Quinlan was so sure about the color if he had never seen it.

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"A Frenchman found it in the late fifties. He wrote a letter to a friend. The friend later emigrated to Canada and I met him in the sixties. We planned an expedition with another guy. You know how it ended."

"What did the letter say?" I asked.

"He wasn't *that* good a friend. I took his word for it that he knew what he was doing. All he told me was that the Frenchman had found a new color and that it was in a marketable form."

"Did he have any special equipment with him?"

"He had a backpack he would never let me touch. Whatever he was after, the answer lay in that pack. The bandits got that...."

"And the other Canadian?" I asked.

"He only knew as much as I did."

Naline said, "What happened to the Frenchman, Quin?"

"He caught something — a jungle fever — and died on a sampan that was taking him to Hong Kong. His personal effects we handed to a customs official. The letter was amongst them." Quinlan shrugged. "Anyway, we'll soon find out."

"The *fourth* primary," I said again, unnecessarily.

"Could be. Yes."

The foliage had been thick and knotted together, and when we had cleared it, I stood looking at the holes in the rock at our feet. Naline took some shots of them. Seeing the camera made me aware of my wound. It was not going to be easy with a bad leg. "I thought we were going to climb upwards?" I said. I was beginning to feel that I was being deceived at every turn. Potholing. We had to climb down, *underground*. I was afraid of being trapped, stuck in some crevice deep in the darkness of the earth. Above us, the mountains heaved, first in heavy green and then in darker colors. Leaden mists groped between the layers of trees, and in the hanging valley to the left the rock edge appeared, suddenly sharp against the sky. It was a scene transported from prehistory: its dull weight terrible on the back of the modern world. No people lived in this place.

"What if it rains while we're down there?"

"Then we'll probably drown. But it won't. The wet season is months away."

"Still...." I could not help but feel terror, staring down at those three mouths of Hell. Psychologically, there is something very disturbing about going below the surface of the world. It was like entering the stomach of some great beast by crawling down its throat. At any second the jaws might snap shut, imprisoning me forever.

"Whatsamatter? Don't you like returning to the womb?" said Quinlan, smiling maliciously. I ignored him. It was not a womb, not to me. A womb is a safe, warm place where one can curl up and allow oblivion to creep over the soul.

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"Which one do we go down?" asked Naline, hitching her pack high on her narrow shoulders. She was more ready than I was, but then by now I knew she was strangely attracted to Quinlan. Whether it was his enigmatic moodiness (which I'm sure she confused with a tortured soul) or the other side of him, the swashbuckling, carefree face which he showed us when he was not brooding on something. I had no idea. Anyway, what she found in him probably contrasted favorably with my simple, forthright personality. Like many people, she preferred a mysterious character to an open one. He was the deep one, and I the shallow. I was sure she wanted to plumb the depths of his soul, having dipped into mine and found it close to the surface.

Quinlan answered her question. "We go down the one on the left. The other two are blind windows."

I looked up. "Blind windows?"

"Windows in the rock that lead to a dead end. Nowhere. Like blind alleys. We'll encounter quite a few of them. That's why we need all these charts." I stared at the pieces of folded linen to which he was referring. I had looked at them while he had been asleep ... and could make nothing of them at the time.

"Just so long as you don't lose us down there," I remarked as casually as I could.

"No chance. This is my forté — potholing. Why'd you think the Canadians wanted me? For my good looks?"

I was suspicious. "How come you never told me?"

"There wasn't any need to. However, I know you've done a bit of mountain climbing. It's similar in some ways, totally different in others. At least you won't panic. You *won't* panic, will you?" His dark eyes searched my face.

"No."

"Good, because between us we've got to look after this little lady here."

Naline said, stiffly, "I'm capable of looking after myself," and turned away from us.

In such relationships, we prepared to descend into the guts of Cambodia. Out of the human dangers of the jungle and down into the elemental dangers of the subterranean. In search of what ... a *color?* We were mad, all of us. Me especially, since I recognized our insanity and still allowed myself to be swallowed. Would we even recognize our holy grail if ever we saw it? Could our eyes, our brains, register something of which no other human had any concept? Perhaps the dead Frenchman had had a particular kind of color blindness which made a perfectly ordinary red, yellow, blue or derivative thereof, seem unique in a strange light? How did I know that the red which I could see was the same color that Naline's brain registered? Or, more likely, perhaps either the Frenchman, the two Canadians or Quinlan was a schizoid, and the whole thing was a fantasy of one, or all of them? My head

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was spinning as I was lowered down, into the blackness, and my legs cycled in mild apprehension as I sought a foothold on the first of many ledges. Then my lamp began to pick out the rock walls of our pothole, smoothed by running water and glistening as the light swung back and forth. My leg jarred when I finally hit a shelf. I knew I was making a mistake but Quinlan had me cold. If I attempted to argue, he would just leave me behind. I did not know the way home, fool that I was. Soon we were edging through narrow crevices and scrambling over boulders. Sometimes dizziness overtook me but I rested for a few moments only. Quinlan was capable of abandoning me, if he knew I was sick.

We are in a place of perpetual night. Without our lamps there would be eternal darkness. I drove such thoughts out of my head and concentrated on the hand and footholds, while listening to the sound of distant water echoing in the sepulchral void which we were penetrating. Quinlan went first, constantly consulting his charts as we came to numerous forks in the tunnels. A blind window, he warned us again, could lead us to our deaths.

Of that, I had little doubt. We found one or two pits that appeared to be bottomless. I dropped stones and abandoned the place without ever hearing the final clatter. An uncanny deep silence, where there should be a noise, is the worst *sound* in the world. Things touched me in the darkness. Spiders, I thought. Perhaps lizards? The deeper we went, the wetter the rocks became. We rested frequently, and during those pauses I prayed that our lamps would hold out. It was hot too, and there was a musty, earthy smell like a freshly dug grave, which bothered my nostrils constantly. Once, Naline slipped into a side pocket and dangled, screaming, between us. After listening for so long to the silence, my ears were highly tuned, and the pitch of her cries drove needles into my brain. Quinlan pulled her up slowly and we comforted her until she had recovered her composure. We then continued along corridors of inner darknesses: tunnels untouched by the sun since their formation.

Suddenly, we began climbing.

"Quinlan!" I called, wincing afterwards at the railing echo. It seemed sacrilegious to break the cathedral stillness of the catacombs. Almost as if priests might converge upon me, from the shadows of hidden alcoves, and condemn my soul to the Devil for destroying their holy peace.

He either chose not to hear, or ignored me. We began to ascend a chimney, legs and back, and I had no energy for further talk. At the top was a cavern, with a low ceiling where stalactites and stalagmites, the fangs of the underworld, impeded our progress and we had to squeeze between them. Then more windows, presumably some of them blind, and on and on, upwards

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and along, but not *down* any more. We continued, with rests, for approximately eighteen hours.

Finally we came to a place where Quinlan suggested we sleep. He was highly excited for some reason, and when I asked why he would only say:

"The Canadian told me about this place. Night outside now. When day comes you'll understand. Feel anything? The breeze?"

He was right. I could. The soft brush of air against my cheek.

We slept. At first Naline had an arm around each of us, but I woke later to find that she was curled fetus-like against Quinlan. I was too feverish to be concerned, and, anyway, it looked too innocent to cause me jealousy: probably the vagaries resulting from a condition of half-sleep were responsible. I finally awoke to the sound of Naline saying softly, "Look, Quin, stars."

I followed the line of her arm, which pointed upwards, and saw what appeared to be the night sky. Something else had changed but I could not pin it down.

A more studied observation proved Naline wrong. They were not stars but distant cracks in the rock through which the daylight shone. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands of them. We appeared to be in some kind of enormous cavern, a hollow mountain, and the light from these fissures lit this inner world with much the same candle power as starlight on a moonless night. We could see, but very dimly. I could make out the shapes of rocks and, nearby, a vast underground lake. There were plants too, around our feet.

"We're here," breathed Quinlan, with an ecstatic note to his voice.

"Where's *here?*" I asked.

"The Frenchman assessed it as six kilometers in radius and the daylight two kilometers away at its nearest point."

"What else did he say?" Naline questioned.

"There's life here. Animal life as well as vegetable. Listen...."

We did so, and suddenly I mentioned what it was that had bothered me before. There was a faint but constant twittering sound, with an undercurrent of rustling. I looked at Quinlan. "Birds," I said. "On the ceiling. They must squeeze in through the cracks."

"Right. And bats. Maybe some of them live and die in here, without ever seeing the outside world. Could be there are fish in the lake too."

"Really?" said Naline, sounding surprised.

"Why not? Birds would bring in spawn on their legs. And perhaps a stream from the outside feeds this lake? Let's set up camp here. I think we should treat every move from now on with caution."

We were in a new world. A place of half-darkness shut away from ordinary life. The knowledge was exhilarating and yet a little terrifying. Should any-

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thing happen to us in here, we would get no help from anyone but ourselves.

"I suggest we conserve the batteries to the lamps," said Quinlan. "Our eyes will soon get used to this light. We should begin searching soon. I reckon we're looking for something living — a plant or a mollusk."

"A mollusk?" said Naline.

"Yes. Something like the banded murex found in the Med. A seashell the Romans used to crush for the purple dye in its stripes...."

I wanted to know more about where we were and what was in here, but Quinlan would tell me nothing beyond the fact that we were in a cavern. "The Frenchman's notes just gave the dimensions — or his estimate of them. What the hell do you want? We're here now. From this point in we're on a voyage of discovery. Enjoy it."

"I'd like to know what was in the Canadian's backpack," I said.

Quinlan replied easily, "I don't give a toss what you'd like, pal, just so long as it doesn't bother me."

We sat down to eat some of the rations we had brought with us. I chewed on some dried fruit. When the meal was over I went apart from the other two to inspect my leg. It was ugly with pus and inflamation. I washed it and changed the dressing before rejoining them. Apart from the soreness, I was beginning to feel light-headed and faintly nauseous. I was almost certain that I had been bitten by a rat, not a snake as I first thought. The other two did not appear to be interested, now that I had not keeled over within a couple of days of being bitten. It may have been pure supposition, but I got the impression that from time to time they exchanged significant glances. What had happened while I slept? Had they whispered the time away to each other, exchanging secrets? Did Naline think I was so foolish as to believe that nothing had grown between them over the past few days? Perhaps they had already...? My mind flash-fired with anger. I tried to concentrate on my surroundings, inspecting the lake and its environs. The light from the "stars" shone on the placid stillness of the water. As Quinlan had said, my eyes began rapidly to adjust to the gloom. Around the lake rose the humped shapes of its rocky shores. I wondered how the place was formed. A volcano? Or water erosion? My reverie was interrupted by a soft splashing sound.

"What was that?" I said, startled.

Suddenly I was alert. Quinlan often spoke of having an animal sixth sense, but I have never believed in vague superpowers, merely in a heightening of the existing five senses.

"What was what?" asked Quinlan.

"That noise."

Naline said, "Probably a bird, or fish, or something. Stop being so wet, Andy." She giggled at her own pun and the sound rippled out over the water. I was agitated for some reason.

"Be quiet, you stupid...." I began, but stopped myself in time. Her laugh-

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ter ceased abruptly and she said, "Yes, Andy?" Then she turned away. Quinlan was staring at me aggressively.

"Nothing. I'm sorry," I replied uncomfortably. "I'm getting ... look, I think I'll explore for a bit. Can you flash one of the lamps every four minutes, so that I can find my way back?"

"Suit yourself," said Quinlan.

"Will you flash the lamp?"

He nodded curtly.

I stumbled away from them, my bravado rapidly dissipating with each step. Very soon I became aware of an intense feeling of loneliness, but nothing would induce me to turn round and go back to them. They were talking about me, I was sure, reaffirming their growing interest in each other. Well, to hell with them. Let them fuck each other. What did I care?

The trouble was, I cared a lot. Too much. I cared that I was loosing Naline, and I cared that it was Quinlan, of all people, who was taking her away from me. What was it that impressed her? His erratic behavior? His stupid hair cut? What? I could climb as well as he. I had more money. What did she want? Someone who mumbled in his cheeks like Brando?

I looked back. The torch flashed three times.

I stumbled over a soft patch between the rocks and switched on the torch. Moss, and some other kind of plant a little like saltwort, squelched beneath my feet. Perhaps this was where we would find the mollusks? Gingerly I turned over a stone in the soggy weed. A thin tentacled starfish slid out making me jump back, squeamishly. Shining my torch behind the patch of dark moss, I illuminated an area of more plant life, this time reed-like and brittle-looking.

A splash behind me made me spin. I was as stiff as a pole, my light searching the surface of the water. Then I found him. My breath caught in my throat and I almost screamed.

About twenty meters out was a naked man lying flat on his belly on what appeared to be a reed raft. He was paddling it with his arms, in an overarm swimming motion. I snapped off the lamp and stood there, shaking violently. Was it a man? Had he pinpointed my position? I began to hurry back towards the others as quietly as I could. My breath sounded abnormally loud, and my ridged climbing boots squealed on the hard surface. I slipped and stumbled once or twice, then stopped and crouched behind a tall rock, listening. All I could hear was my own blood pounding in my ears. I saw the lamp flashing ahead and began to make towards it, gratefully.

"Quinlan," I said breathlessly on reaching them. "There's someone here." I tried to explain what I had seen while they listened in silence. When I had finished my rather inarticulate account, Quinlan said, "There must be another way in. Show me where you saw him."

"Now?"

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"Of course now. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said. Why should I give him the satisfaction of knowing I was uneasy ... more than uneasy, paranoid. I led him back to the place where I had seen the boatman. Naline following, presumably because she did not relish the idea of staying alone. We were careful not to use our flashlights. As we neared the mossy patch, we could hear a low murmuring. I counted about seven of them standing, but at least two were kneeling, beside something white. It was not easy to judge how tall they were, especially in natural light, but I guessed not one of them was over four feet. They were all naked, but since they were huddled together, it was difficult to tell males from females. There was a body at their feet. I was trembling, both with excitement and fear, my attention absorbed completely by the people before me. Naline and Quinlan too, were silent: just the soft sound of breathing near my head.

Suddenly, the group on the moss lifted the supine body above their shoulders and carried it towards the rockwall at the back of the cavern. They soon disappeared from view.

"What shall we do?" I whispered.

"Wait," replied Quinlan. "They've gone into an opening — probably a subsidiary cavern."

We stood for about an hour, by which time my muscles were screaming and on the edge of a bout of cramp. Quinlan suddenly gripped my shoulder hard, and I saw the small group emerging from the shadows, one by one. It was too gloomy to get more than an oblique idea of their shape and build, but they definitely appeared to be humans. They each picked something off the ground at the water's edge, stepped into the shallows, and paddled off, out into the lake. Eventually, the last one had gone. Quinlan tapped my hand and we began making our way quietly towards the dark window, with Naline holding onto my belt.

Using our lamps, we entered the recess. As Quinlan had guessed, it was a smaller, subsidiary cavern about the size of a village church. I played the light around the walls and saw that shelves had been cut into the rock. There were bundles lying on the platforms and the air was thick with a foul odor. We inspected the nearest shelf. It held a corpse, the bones sticking through the dry flesh. There was very little meat left on it, and when Quinlan poked the abdomen with his finger, the taut brittle skin cracked open like a thin carapace. The next two hollows held only bones. Finally we came to a fresh one: presumably the creature that had just been laid to rest. *Creature*, because that word described it more accurately than the term *human*. Although the lips, nostrils and eyelids had been sewn up tightly, it was plainly the face of a monkey. A man's body: a monkey's face.

"Jesus," I heard Quinlan whisper.

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There was a soft groan from Naline. We turned the lights onto her face. She had gone a deathly grey and she was backing towards the exit.

"*Hanuman,*" she whispered.

Quinlan and I looked at each other in obvious incomprehension.

"*Hanuman,*" she repeated, "A god!"

There were times when Naline seemed totally Westernized in her attitudes, but now she had retreated behind an Asiatic cultural screen and was inaccessible.

"This one's no god," grunted Quinlan. "Nor his friends and relations. They're primitives of some kind."

"Not animals though," I mused. "Tools ... the single-man rafts. And one of the first signs of civilization is a reverence for the dead."

I think there must have been a buzzing in all our minds when we left the burial chamber a few minutes later. There was certainly one in mine. None of us spoke about it, but I think we all realized we had found a new race of men. Subhumans, perhaps, but very close to us. It was not something we *could* put into words yet: it was too important to try to frame it orally. We had, each of us, to allow our own turbulent feelings to evolve into some form of rational acceptance of the unacceptable. Naline was clearly very shaken. Somewhere in her culture there was a mythological creature very like the one we had just seen. I wondered how *I* would feel if our friend had had cloven hooves, horns and a little pointed head. He had been startling enough to me. To her, he was the manifestation of a familiar childhood dream, perhaps a nightmare. Late that night we spoke of it again and Naline told us the story of *Hanuman.*

"He was son of the wind-god, *Vayu,* and one legend say his mother was a monkey. Another that he mistake the sun for golden fruit and sprang three thousand mile into the air to reach it. The sky-god, *Indra,* was afraid and broke his jaw giving him ape-like chin."

"There's more to it than that," I said. "You accepted the idea too readily."

"Yes." She hung her head. "*Hanuman's* Chinese counterpart, *Monkey,* was buried under a mountain by *Buddha.* This was punishment meted to *Monkey* for drinking jade juice and ruby extract, so that his body became as hard as a diamond and invulnerable. We are ... under this mountain. I was afraid at first but that was silly. I'm all right now."

"Well, what do we do about these ... people?" I asked. "Do we just ignore them, or study them, continue searching for our lost color? What?"

"Maybe observe them to a degree," Quinlan said. "But we're not anthropologists. We don't know what's important. When we get out, then I can come back with a trained team."

"Should you do that?" I said.

Naline looked at me hard.

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"Why not?" she countered.

"You know what will happen. They'll be installing soft-drink machines in here within the year."

"You mean we should leave them in peace? Like good little conservationists?" sneered Quinlan.

I replied, "If we get what we came for, why should we need to trouble these people?"

"Fame," he said, bluntly.

"If we find a new color, we *will* be famous. Perhaps the prestige of discovering a lost tribe would be greater, but our fortunes and all that goes with it will be assured."

"And if we don't find it?" Naline asked.

I was adamant. "The Frenchman found it. We'll find it. Let's leave these people alone."

I sensed, rather than saw, Quinlan nod at Naline. I knew him well and what his reaction to conservation would be. I was rich, he was poor, he would say. People with money could afford to be philanthropic; could afford to have integrity. Those without it were entitled to exploit whatever they were able, after which they too could develop morals. I had heard the speech and did not want a repeat.

"Get stuffed," he said, finally, under his breath. "I'll do what I think's right, from *my* point of view."

"Well, think *hard* about it, Quin," I said. "I'm tired. I'm going to hit the sack. Are you coming, Naline?" My head was spinning and I needed sleep.

Her voice was small in the darkness. "I'll stay up for a bit. I want to talk to Quin. You go ahead though."

Anger flooded through me. Having said I wanted to bed down, I could hardly stay without seeming childish. I crawled into my sleeping bag, a few yards away, and fell into a deep sleep with their mumbled conversation, just too low to understand, gently fanning my annoyance. Conspiracy. I could not get rid of a Shakespearean word that persistently picked at my brain. *Hugger-mugger.* They were *hugger-mugger.* Later, I heard them creep away. I knew where they were going and what they were going to do. Naline would have one of her cameras with her. They were going to the tombs.

We spent the next few starlit days searching our immediate environment. Occasionally we came across one or more of the monkey-people but they would never let us get close to them. They drifted in and out of our sight like distant phantoms reluctant to allow direct contact. As far as I was concerned, the policy was mutual. I had no wish to disturb or interrupt the rhythm of this underground world in any way, except perhaps in the course of locating the mystical, perhaps imaginary, new color. In Naline's case, I was sure that the desire for fame at any price was just a matter of following Quinlan's footsteps. She had clearly been shaken by their appearance, and cultural fears ran deep, but she was

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also infatuated with Quinlan. I observed her narrow brown eyes as she, in turn, studied him. He was often belligerant towards me and at such times she retreated behind one of her Asiatic masks. There was no doubt that her loyalties had undergone a change, and my physical (and mental) condition made me react with bouts of sullen jealousy, and pushed her further towards him. She was fascinated by him in the way that someone is intrigued by a creative artist with dark moods. She wanted to *understand* him, perhaps.

They were spending their nights together now. Nothing was said, by any of us, but a wall had gone up. I took my sleeping bag and settled well away from them, occasionally even eating on my own. To his credit he allowed no overt demonstration of affection, but that only made the situation bearable, not acceptable. I was still fond of her, but I hated him. Sometimes I almost choked on exchanging the merest civilities with him. Mostly, I had to get out on my own and leave them to each other's company.

Success eluded us. We found many unusual shades, but all had the familiar base tinge of the three primary colors. Our supplies began to run low and we started fishing the lake for extra food, pulling in pale and often translucent specimens. Naline was constantly photographing the scenery, and us, but could never entice the monkey-men near enough. I did not tell her that ironically it was probably the continual flash of her camera that kept them away. It was a strange feeling, sitting alone in a half-lit world where the natural sounds of birds and animals threw muted echoes into dark corners. It all seemed so unreal. It *was* unreal. Occasionally I would hear the distant splash of small hands propelling rafts across the still surface of the lake. (We had still not found their community home, though to be truthful we stayed clear of subsidiary caverns that looked as if they might be occupied. We had no idea of their numbers and they might have turned hostile.)

I was still very sick. My body temperature was constantly high. The pain had increased in intensity. I knew, also, that blood poisoning could be fatal, and this worried me unceasingly. Once or twice I had tried to explain my predicament to the other two but they kept repeating, "Soon. We'll go home soon. Give it another day." And the days came in and went out.

Suddenly a wave of resentment washed over me one morning. A cruel trick entered my mind through the dizzy wash of thoughts, and without pausing to consider, I made my way to where I knew I would find the other two.

"Quinlan," I called, scrambling up towards them. "Quickly, I think I've found something." I introduced as much excitement into my voice as I could muster. He jumped to his feet. "What? What's the matter?" He looked startled. Naline sat up, groping for her

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shirt, hiding her breasts with her hands. A silly gesture, since I had seen her naked many times before.

"I've found something. Quickly." I set off at a steady pace, stepping around rock stacks and pillars. Quinlan followed, though less actively. I led him a quarter of a mile and pointed upwards to a ledge I had climbed to on my own, the previous day. "There!" I started to find the handholds and pull myself up. I heard him mutter something and then sensed he was following.

The climb was difficult and dangerous in my rapidly deteriorating condition, but it had a reward at the other end which was worth the pain.

It took quite a while to reach the rock shelf. We were both panting for breath as we heaved ourselves up over the hanging lip. We were about sixty feet from the bottom, and I knew that the climb down would be even more strenuous.

I sat against the face, recovering while Quinlan looked frantically around him. "Where?" he said. I remained silent and eventually he saw a clump of fungi on a damp area near the edge.

"Fungus?" he said, switching on his lamp. He stepped eagerly towards it and broke a piece off to study it under the artificial light. After a few minutes he shone the light on my face. I could not keep from smiling.

"You *bastard,*" he swore. "It's bloody *purple.* Don't you know ... yeah, yeah, you know, you shit." He threw the fungus at me hard, and it splattered painfully on the side of my head. Then he seemed to go berserk, screaming at me in a high, womanish voice and flinging great lumps of the stuff at my head. I put my hands over my face, laughing into my palms as the fungi strick the rock wall behind, and occasionally hit me. Then something happened. I think he slipped on a damp patch. I heard the note in his voice change and looked up to see he was no longer standing there.

"Andy!" The tone was urgent, desperate. Then I saw his hand gripping the edge, the knuckles white with the effort of holding on.

"Andy! God, please...."

I reached out, hesitating only for a split second, then he was gone, without a sound. I heard his body hit the bottom with a loud crack. His head. Then Naline's screams came up to me. After a long while they changed to sobs, and slowly I began to descend.

She was looking out across the water when I finally reached the bottom. We sat for an hour, just staring at the body, when small sounds drifted to us over the lake. They were coming to us now, about thirty of them, on their small rafts, close together for reassurance. When they reached the shore, they came forward as a group, touching each other repeatedly. Ignoring Naline and myself, they clustered around the body, moaning softly and making slight, indefinite gestures.

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Then some of them lifted the body onto their shoulders and began to move off.

"Wait!" I called, but only one, a male, took any heed. He came back and looked up at me, curiously. I shone a light into his monkey face. Then I began laughing again — the same kind of laughter that had overwhelmed me on the ledge — and he ran off in fright. But I found it impossible to control myself. It was so ironic. So *damned* unfair. Eventually I was aware that Naline was pounding me with her small fists, sobbing, "Stop it. Stop it. *Stop it.*" And I choked on the sound and finally subsided into my own tears of grief and frustration. Perhaps we were crying for different reasons, I don't know. I believe we were.

"He was *Hanuman*, your god-monkey," I said at last. "Why didn't he show us before?"

"You're not sane any more," she said. "This place has turned your brain. Keep away from me. I don't want you near me. You could have saved Quin. You let him die, you bastard."

"I tried to ... I reached out, but he was gone before my hand could touch him. It's you who is insane, not me. I reached out...."

"Too slow, Andy. You were too slow."

Perhaps she was right? Maybe I was mad? I did not care any more. I had seen *him*. *Monkey*. There were dozens, females too. Under the mountain, placed on them by *Buddha*, they had bred since the time Earth belonged to the gods, since they walked abroad and among mortals. *HANUMAN,"* I called, the sound echoing over and over.

"They're just people," said Naline quietly. "Just ordinary people."

Then I told her. The eyes. The color was in their eyes. I knew now what had been in the Canadian's pack. A net, tranquilizer darts, something to catch a man. The Frenchman had found a lost tribe with unique face and eyes. The Canadian wanted to take one back to civilization. Quinlan had not been that ambitious. A new color and some photographs of monkey people would have satisfied him. *Photographs!* That night I stole Naline's cameras and threw them into the lake. When she found out, she screamed abuse at me and said she was going to leave me to die. I believed her.

Over the following few days my physical condition deteriorated even further. The fever would not leave me, and I stumbled around with heavy limbs, aware of the thickening of my speech but unable to control it. Thoughts moved in and out of my aching brain with viscous consistency. My dreams became tangible, organic scenes that I carried in my head, awake or asleep. Around the wound left by the bite, the skin had turned a blackish-yellow and smelled.

Naline only spoke to me when she

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had to and studiously avoided my eyes. She gathered together our possessions and prepared to leave. Then another of the monkey-people died, and after we had witnessed the body being carried into the tomb, Naline said to me, "We could take him with us." It took a little while for her remark to permeate to my reason.

"I ... we could never carry him. Remember all those difficult parts ... couldn't climb out carrying a body. Too sick."

"We *have* to take *proof*," she said fiercely. "Otherwise Quin died for nothing. The people outside will want us to show them proof of the monkey-people's existence." Her voice became hard. "I won't help you, unless you help me."

"Couldn't do it," I said, my head buzzing softly.

"You weak bastard. You always were weak."

"Wait. Wait. Got an idea. Look, we'll take the monkey-man's head. I'll get it and we can wrap it in wet cloth. Okay?" I said it, though the thought of decapitating a corpse filled me with distaste.

She seemed mollified. "Yes. The eyes. We must show them the eyes ... and face. Do it, Andy. We'll be famous. Quin too. It'll make all this worthwhile, won't it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I suppose so." She was too strong for me now. The pressure of her demands was too powerful to resist. I took a machete, and when there were no monkey-people around the tomb, I entered and found the shelf with the body. Then, overcoming the natural revulsion that welled up to collect in my throat, I hacked the head free from the corpse. Outside the burial cavern, I wrapped the head in cloth soaked in the lake. I had given Naline the idea that this would help preserve it longer. Winding the strips around tightly, I knotted them several times. When I had finished it, it looked like any one of the other innocuous bundles we carried in our backpacks. I left a flap of cloth open at the grisly end of the neck and showed it to Naline.

She winced at the sight of the raw flesh, then nodded dumbly. I completed the wrapping, put the head in her haversack, and then collapsed exhausted, to fall asleep.

During sleep I relived the severing the head. I heard again the short, sharp, "Uhh! Uhh! Uhh!" of breath as I chopped through the spinal cord. The sawing of rubbery tendons. Thank God, the eyelids had been sewn. Although I carried out the actual act in the dark, I would have *felt* those eyes on mine, compelling, accusing.

Naline has taken with her all Quinlan's charts of the underground passages. Whether or not she is able to decipher them, I don't know. I hope she makes it, even though she has abandoned me. I guessed she would. When she went, I don't know.

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My illness makes it difficult to think straight.

I am trapped, held captive by a network of blind windows. A man in a maze. There is only one way through them and many, many false trails. A single blind window might lead me astray for hours, into several more of its kind, until I am hopelessly lost. And these strange monkey-people. They sit around me, in a circle, their small wrinkled faces illuminated by the light from the lamp. As long as I sit quietly, they are not frightened. While I write this account, I can feel their breath on me. And their eyes, caught wide and fast in their fascination with the lamp, hold the color for which we have searched for so long. How can I describe it to you, this new color? I can't. I can see it, vivid in the light. It burns its hue into my retina. (An iris! Would we ever have thought of deliberately looking there?) Yet I cannot convey even an inkling of what it means to me. A ring of earnest faces, ancient monkey faces stamped with monkey wisdom, set with gems of a unique color.

Tomorrow I shall attempt the climb to one of those fissures high above in the hope that it will be large enough to crawl through. I am weak with sickness, and the rock face is virtually sheer, but I am full of optimism. I will make it. Even if I don't, a fall is better than a wasting death. Quinlan went that way. Then they could have me, these clownish creatures. Death is an event in their dull lives: an entertainment. They danced and crooned over Quinlan's body for hours. No doubt they would do the same with mine: the light is in those eager eyes. An event!

They are waiting for the event!

Forgive me for saying I want to cheat them of the pleasure.

I wronged Naline, even at the last, but how could I betray those vulnerable creatures to mankind? Naline wanted to be close to Quinlan: well, she has him with her now, part of him at least. She has his head.

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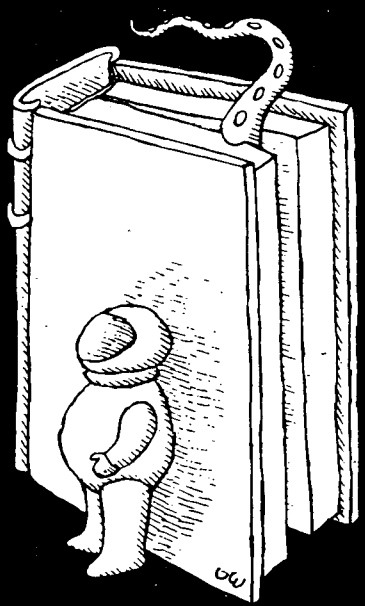

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Not This August, C.M. Kornbluth, Tor Books, $2.95.

The Sardonyx Net, Elizabeth A. Lynn, Putnam, $15.95.

The Pride of Chanur, C.J. Cherryh, DAW Books, $2.95. Science Fiction Book Club, $2.98.

I was re-reading *The Long Loud Silence* the other day, in its first paperback edition, and damned near fell out of my chair. I had come across the word "preventive." No one says "preventive" anymore; it's "preventative maintenance" and "preventative medicine." For that matter, those few who still know which way the wind is blowing are properly "orientated," but are giving ground begrudgingly under the administrations of cocksure ignorami such as the sententious *Consumer Reports* essayist who recently referred to a "metallic-like" substance.

I bring this up not to do my Edwin Newman act, but to do my book reviewer act. To look at Dell Book #791, produced in 1953 at a guess, is to realize acutely that something profound has happened in the book trade over the past three decades. Not that we didn't know it was happening, or that it's unexpected. The senior personnel at most publishing houses now are the products of general American education as practiced in the 1950s and '60s, and the idea of language as a precision instrument simply is not in their bones. Copyediting and proofreading are done, when done, by junior personnel

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who are not only similarly crippled but, unlike their counterparts in earlier generations, are inaccurately supervised and are given reference guides themselves generated by persons to whom language is not a song but a morass.

-Reading a book these days is often a tiresome exercise in deduction. No one reads proof in the proper manner; thus the errors of equally improper typesetting are not caught. What is one to make of a sentence like "They clamored up the sides of the truck."? Here's how it happened: (A) The author wrote "They clambered up," etc., and in the days of Linotype-set copy a fifty-year-old alcoholic with a cigar in his mouth, chatting about horses and women to the operator at the next machine, would have set "clambered" letter for letter, the characters flowing directly from his eyes to his fingertips on the keyboard with, thank God, no conscious intervention. But copy nowadays is set by people who read the words to themselves, and they are constantly setting not what is on the paper but what they expect to see, or the homonym they hear in their minds.

(B) In the old days, the resulting galley would have been read by a fifty-five-year-old alcoholic, chatting about women and horses, with the copy in front of him. The proof would have flowed through his blackened thumbs until, with hardly any conscious intervention, a discrepancy between copy and galley occurred. Still without much thought, the type would have been marked for conformity with the copy, and the conversation would have resumed in mid-syllable. These days, "proofreading" is done by people who simply read the words, sometimes catch obvious mechanical errors, but are reading only for plausibility. Not until something implausible by their standards appears in the galley do they hunt through the manuscript, which is lying over there, under the coffee cup. Thus, "Rock Creek Park" becomes "Rock Creek Road," and stays that way, whereas in days of yore — say, 1953 — at worst it would have stayed "Rock Creek Pack."

There is no question but that the majority of today's copy-processors would have been out on the street on their cans if they had pulled that sort of stuff twenty-five years ago. By the same token, if one of the grizzled veterans of the days of hot-metal type were to seek employment in a modern shop, no one could afford or tolerate him for more than ten minutes. Times have changed, fundamentally, and if we are to have books at all, we are going to have the production methods of the late 20th century and all that this entails.

But this means that the text you buy is inevitably going to be only approximately what the author wrote. (Not that text production was ever perfect; the thing is, a line dropped by losing a slug from a galley tray is glaringly obvious, while a line dropped because the typesetter's eye fell down to the

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next line in the copy may not be. "Tht" for "the" is an obvious typo; "them" for "the" and "was" for "saw" often are not.)

There is more to this than simple fogginess of communication. Dell Book #791 is no prize piece of the bookman's art. It's mass-market paperback production as practiced mid-century, and that's all it is. But *you can tell where the errors are.* Furthermore, built into its production system was an automatic respect for the author's intention, or at least as that intention was understood by a copyeditor into whom had been trained a respect for ideal communication. In the systems that were, in which no one in the production stages cared what the text said, but only cared about making sure that all the e's, t's, a's, and so forth, in the galley were exactly placed where all the e's, t's and a's were in the copy, there was, ironically, a nearly foolproof method for transmitting the text's intention. Under the new systems, in which the text is actually read for sense — or its semblance — what we get, much more often than you suspect, is clean typography and garbage sense. Dell 791 is hardly free of typos. The point, though, is that the reader can tell what Wilson Tucker meant.

Not only can we see what Wilson Tucker meant, but we can presume Wilson Tucker was sufficiently conversant with language, the instrument, to have originally said what he meant. No such presumption can be entertained in connection with any contemporary writer; each is presumably remiss until proven otherwise on a case-by-case basis. Each writer who does so prove represents an individual triumph over a system in which the sense of what is being said is a matter of opinion.

What else would you call it, when the system is geared to produce *whatever* "sounds" right? A modern compositor, in the same system with modern production editors and proofers, inevitably introduces seeming creativity which blurs the creation in the manuscript, which manuscript may very well be only an approximation of what the writer felt. What we get as an end-product are texts embodying hundreds of places where the apparently clear statement is in fact an approximation, and frequently a wholely mechanical one — a piece of stochasm, to go with the solecisms, pleonasms, tautologies and oxymorons built into the "education" of *all* those responsible for the key-strokes, including the writer.

The only comfort in all this is that the readers, too, number an increasing proportion of people who deem language to be no more than a hint. That's cold comfort, of course — the end result of this distancing between the reader and the text, the author and the text, the text and the author's intention, and the book and the people who market the book, will be a profound contempt for books. I do not doubt that in many cases it is already here, or

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that to some degree it is already everywhere, and I cannot find much cheerful light to cast upon it. The root cause is in the elementary school classroom, in the irredeemable past; the cure, thank God, is beginning to appear in that same classroom now; we have but to wait a full generation for the pendulum to swing back. There, now — are you cheered?

Some publishing houses, of course, are more concerned with this situation than others. It may be a coincidence, for example, but no place Jim Baen has ever supervised has had anything much like proofreading; not *Galaxy*, not Ace Books, and now not Tor Books. Baen is an inventive, hard-working, consciously thinking editor. One does not have to always agree with the tenor of his thoughts to recognize them as uncommonly energetic expressions of editorial creativity, and to respect a person who outstrips many of his colleagues in that regard. But perhaps because he is always working for marginal publishers — which argues for insufficient staff, or insufficient time — reading a Baen-produced book means getting the eye snagged an inordinate number of times, and a growing uneasiness about the other plausible typos and misconstructions that might have gotten by one. One can only hope that in course of time this signature on his work will yield to the general excellence of the many other personal marks he makes. Meanwhile, we make the extra effort, which is often worth it, irksome though it be.

Perhaps because I was around when Cyril was writing it and was privileged to observe directly how meticulously he did his homework on it, but perhaps simply because it is a good piece of work, I've always felt that *Not This August* was C.M. Kornbluth's best solo novel. Jim Baen and Tor are due some extra grace in Heaven for having rescued it from oblivion, as is Frederik Pohl for his executorship of the Kornbluth literary estate.

"Revised and with a Foreword and Afterword by Frederik Pohl," the Tor edition does its best to transmit the sense and shape of Kornbluth's intended text; typos aside, it succeeds perhaps better than a straight reprint.

Taken as a forecast of what life in these United States would be if we became the next Hungary, the book has the gritty feel of unpalatable truth. It should; the Soviet administration tactics and policies are solidly based on meticulous research into recorded history. It takes a sharp writer, nevertheless, to translate this into a vivid public disciplinary machinegunning at the high school stadium. And it takes a Cyril Kornbluth to set it up in such a way that the reader can see the good common sense behind the MVD's taking this action. A lesser writer would have played it only for its atrocity; Kornbluth makes it a working part of his novel, so much so that the quality

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of his art is concealed.

Only if we remember how many, many times we have seen the Red Menace depicted as Godless Aetheistic (and thus irrational and fundamentally cryptic and terrifying) Monstrosity, and how few times, even now, its day-to-day pragmatisms are exposed, do we realize just how good a book this is at this level. This — and all the large and small evolutions within Kornbluth's New York State rural characters — is exactly how it would be, and I say this not so much because of any personal experience of mine but because Kornbluth, never having actually had the experience, was artist enough to deduce it, synthesize it in the sense Hemingway synthesized, and transmit it.

Probably this is why the New York Daily News was moved to give it an editorial page endorsement when it first appeared, characterizing it as "far more powerful than 1984," which is bushwah. This book is not about the same things as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is, on that level, a day-to-day account of small heroisms and cowardices, of indecisions and cupidities, misfortunes and happy happenstances in the lives of ordinary people who had never before had a clear idea of the things that constitute freedom and the many amenities which are irrelevant to it. In that respect, it is a far less manipulative, far less generalized book than Orwell's, and far more human for all that we understand Winston Smith stands for All Mankind; the people in *Not This August* have smaller aspirations, more like ours.

On another level, there is the obligatory pulp plot, in which at the last possible moment All is Retrieved. This I suggest you read for the grace notes; Kornbluth's way with the pulp character — the man who was petrified by doors, the former English guardsman who has become a wandering mystic, the farm laborer who is a general in the underground army, the fatally conscientious postman — is a way not often seen since the days when everyone did that, though not often as well as Kornbluth did it.

The thing is, you can't do it — you can't draw this sort of cartoon this well — unless you have a considerable understanding of what's in the human heart, and in the human condition. Heaven knows, the world contains an amazing number of real people who are in truth pulp romantics. Now, looking back, we see how a story containing a number of such people juxtaposed just so, to make the plot run smooth, is false to reality because of that juxtaposition. What it is true to, if done well, is ideals. Because anyone can see that ideals are cheap currency, smart people see this kind of writing as cheap, and hold its practitioners cheap. But what anyone can see is not always all there is and not always all that moves in the reader's heart.

Some sense of this is given in Frederik Pohl's appended words — as much

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as essay writing can give. And that will start you on your way to reading this novel, which probably needs some such sort of frame to set it in perspective, it being almost as old as *The Long Loud Silence*. But the novel does its own work. It has occurred to me, after re-reading it now, that the measure of a piece of art is not in what it's about but in how it is; how *Now This August* is, is memorable.

Elizabeth A. Lynn writes a good book. Putnam, which to my certain knowledge once set a book with over 200 plausible errors in it, from a manuscript meticulously but not always thoughtfully copy-edited, and not referred to by the in-house proofreader, may or may not have done a decent job of bringing you *The Sardonyx Net*. There are odd lapses in the syntax and sometimes in the flow of events; not all of these, I think, represent the author's intention, and certainly not the general care with which she writes.

The general care with which she writes has created a book that's a far better than average reading experience. The premise is that there is a society in one corner of the interstellar Federation where slavery is legal — and a rational economic policy — and that the crisis comes when fanatical police work and probably a certain amount of international* politicking behind the scenes act to interrupt the smuggling of the drug that keeps the slaves happy. We see the story largely through the viewpoint of Rhani Yago, who has a paramount vested interest in keeping things as they are. We see it a little bit through the eyes of Dana Ikoro, the smalltime smuggler who becomes a slave to Rhani, and to some extent through Zed Yago, Rhani's psychopathic brother and captain of the Yago family's slave-hauling starship.

And those are the terms on which the story works out. After a great deal of jockeying, the Dorazine crisis is averted, the bad cop is destroyed, and Zed is cured of his pathology while Dana gains his liberty. Lynn is a skillful writer with a great deal of imagination in the right places; the story moves from plausible setting to richly imagined event after event, and a species of classic tragedy works itself out with many of the trappings of epic grandeur. The book's page-count (289), multiplied by space for 600 closely set words per page, produces a story that could easily have bulked up as large as *Lord Valentine's Castle*. (If I exaggerate, it's not by much; apparently, paper has now become more expensive than key-strokes per cube of volume.)

I did that deliberately. A "nation" can as readily be spread over an entire planet, or system of planets, as it can over a few counties. Some critics — Damon Knight among them in speaking of another book — would have it be "interplanetary." That is chauvinism, and presents a ridiculous image to boot.

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But what have we here? The virtue of Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage*, whose mode this superficially resembles, was that although the story was told entirely from the viewpoint of someone with a vested interest in a parasitic social system, she eventually came to realize it was time to stand back for another look and, having looked, to take action. That *was* the story, and I think it's reasonable for a reader of Lynn's book to be waiting for that to happen to Rhani. It doesn't; she specifically rejects the possibility. There goes that hypothesis.

Then what have we here? That Campbellian mode in which the point of the story is to make the reader accept the virtue of an ultraconservative philosophical contention? No, not that, either; Lynn is a writer of this, her time, and the easy sophistic confections often seen in ASF's latter days are perhaps part of her heritage but hardly in her armamentarium. What then?

I think what we have here — I *think* what we have here — is an attempt at that very, very rare beast, a story in which the repugnant aspects of the human scholium are proved to be no less intrinsically noble than those which are judged laudable. An attempt, if you will, to separate the essential from the attractive.

Now, that's a big trick to pull off, though I can think of few worthier ambitions in an artist. On the level of the adventure story, and even on the level of the Hellenic mode, *The Sardonyx Net* works quite well, and is rather more literate than most SF work. But on that deeper level ... well, perhaps it ought to have been longer, to make room for all the additional support that proposition requires. Yet, when I think of the interminable unambitious works that cross my desk, each clutching the tail of the pachyderm before it, I have to look on *The Sardonyx Net* as another species entirely, and, if not burning as bright as it may, an indubitable tiger.

It's been years since I reviewed a C.J. Cherryh book. The reason is a subtle one; she's too good at what she does, and she does it often. I think the same reason accounts for the fact that although she has a large and loyal following, few short lists of the top contemporary SF writers nowadays include her name. It's not that everyone isn't glad to see her; rather, it's that she's always there.

Let me explain by analogy: The bartender serves the steadiest customer last.

Cherryh — Caroline Cherryh — has become "family" in this establishment. Her qualities are presumed known and her loyalty is a matter of course. Newer faces, with fresh idiosyncrasies to be explored, attract attention away from the fact that her performance is not only frequent and consistent but also on a level of quality to which few writers will ever attain. If she published one book every two or

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three years, she'd be far better off in that respect, which tells you something about the correlation between being idolized and being good.

From the beginning of what is now a very long career, measuring in terms of noteworthy production rather than years, it's been obvious that she is possessed of major talent. An elegant prosaist, she is also an uncommonly deft storyteller with a very broad range of education and insight, a characterizer with no visible defects, and, of utmost importance in SF writing, strikingly capable of imagining and then of depicting what she has imagined. If this seems a picture of a paragon, well, that's what I was trying to say. I'm also aware that paragons are a little diminished in their effect because there is a place in all of us that's made a little uncomfortable by them. They're too damned steady; by their very presence, they hint that they have found what the rest of us would rather go on looking for.

In that sense, Cherryh is hermetic. She staked out a territory — the SF adventure story richly told — and settled down in it so thoroughly that it would manifestly be safe to back her in it against all comers. She did have some start-up problems, of which the most obvious were made so by her many virtues. The texture and depth of any given situation in her early work, for example, contrasted strongly with a certain shyness about having the climactic action occur onstage.

This is a common fault among writers; a fault not sufficiently noted in places where the skills of writing are discussed and taught. It is not underplaying, it *is* shyness, in some writers amounting to an outright failure of nerve, and in early Cherryh work it stood out not because she displayed the trait to any inordinate point but because, as I say, she did so many other craftsmanly things so much better than most.

The other noteworthy problem was her fondness and her gift for generating alien linguistics, relying on it as a stefnal device to the point where a reader might have been advised to take written notes on her glossary and the intricate alien social institutions it reflected. Up to a point, that sort of thing is one of the major charms of SF. Past that point, particularly in stories intended to be fast-moving, it does drag. When it is there for its own sake only, as it sometimes was, it can even annoy.

If, like me, you began to shy away from Cherryh's work a little not because it lacked virtues but because of what you told yourself was an inexplicable and undefined reluctance — meaning there were so many little reasons you couldn't come up with a clear one — let me direct you to *The Pride of Chanur*. It is an immensely successful piece of art.

Pyanfar Chanur is a merchant captain, a tough veteran of commerce across the gulfs of interstellar space, trafficking with alien races whose na-

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ture is far removed from hers. She, like her crew, is female and tigerish. The males of her race are too unstable to leave their home world, where they are constantly aggravated into near-psychosis by the territorial imperatives that have left her society an agglomeration of family holdings under constant internecine aggression.

Told entirely from Pyanfar's viewpoint, the story begins when, at a trading port far from home, she incurs the chillingly energetic enmity of the kif, a gray, self-righteous race. What has happened is that a hitherto unheard-of organism — a white, clawless, nearly hairless male named Tully — has escaped from the kif ship where it was being held captive and has sought shelter on board Pyanfar's vessel. It is helpless, starving, wounded, and unable to communicate in any civilized tongue. Pyanfar might give it back to the kif. But their reaction is so arrogant and so precipitous that this worthless thing takes on worth as a matter of pride.

And from there the story evolves. Pursued, reviled on all sides by those whom the kif hunt for Tully has incidentally injured, conscious that she is precipitating a situation whose consequences will be unguessable and whose dimensions she cannot grasp, Pyanfar and her crew fight their way homeward with Tully on board. Even her own race has turned against her, and her household is in disarray. Perhaps the mahendo'sat, who come and go among the stars on their errands, are allies in some sense. Perhaps the methane-breathing knnn, utterly alien and possessed of superb ships, have — this once — a discernable purpose in their actions. But Pyanfar does not know; what she has is courage, a merchant captain's shrewdness and pride. Though the heavens fall, there are things one does, and things one does not do.

The feline alien is of course an SF staple. Frankly — although my family always includes a lone male cat who comes inside for some of his meals and most of his sleep, and I have the responsibility for feeding him and providing what comforts he needs of us — I am not beguiled by this device. As usually done, these aliens relate to actual felines about as well as Doctor Moreau's creations relate to humans. But I commend Pyanfar, and her crew and ... family ... to your attention. She would be an alien, yet a consistent and understandable alien, whether she had fur and claws or not. And an admirable one.

That goes without saying. The protagonist of an SF adventure story is bound to be admirable on some level. But how many do you find in the literature about whom you could then go on to write a complete biography? Cherryh does not tell us all that much about her Pyanfar's past or culture in so many words. What she does do is create a complete being, in a completely realized and understandable social

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setting, while actually showing us little more than a few days in her life, and furthermore a few days in which she is almost invariably in a totally artificial environment. What Cherryh has done for us in relation to Pyanfar is essentially the obverse of what Pyanfar tries to do with Tully; understand this individual, and deduce empires from him, while at first knowing nothing about his context. Nor does she ever learn all that much; Tully is the nexus of this adventure, but in no other sense a significant actor in the story. He is, to stretch analogy, little more than a Maltese Falcon.

Now this, I submit, is what we mean when we say *tour de force*. We say it too often. This book serves as a measure of how often we ought to say it. This is quintessential SF. Under the hardware and the galactic intrigue, under the fur and claws, under the glossary — measured out deftly now, and always to best effect — under the hurtling storyline brought to a controlled and satisfactory climax — is the probe into what is essential in self-aware life. This need not have been a major work of SF. Perhaps it had no ambitions to be one; its ostensible compass is after all small, its commentary on vast contemporary human social questions is apparently nil, its galaxy is not cluttered with superhuman intelligences prone to significant philosophical utterance. It needed only to be a plain tale plainly told. And that is what it is. But some tales plainly have an impact out of all proportion to what they at first appear to be about.

The biggest thing about it is that it's just the latest Cherryh novel, from DAW Books (and the SF Book Club, whose edition sports an evocative Mike Whelan cover and Doubleday's usual competent production job on the text). It might be better for the community to keep Cherryh in her special but somewhat out-of-the-way niche, because if we allow ourselves to become too much aware of what the standard has actually been set at, quite a few more of us might become uncomfortable with the usual reading, and writing.

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In which Mr. Anvil speculates in a not entirely serious manner on the uses and problems of a brand new breed of farm animal, the living tractor...

Superbiometalemon

BY
CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

Riveracre Farms, R.D. #1
Hewitt's Corners, MN
August 18, 1998

Interdisciplinary Genetronics
Transportation Division
100 Bionutronics Drive
Detroit, MI
Attn: Gene-Splicing Dept.

Dear Sirs:

I am once again writing to you, with considerable reluctance, and more in sorrow than in anger, but I believe you will see, if you will kindly *read* what I am saying, that I have good reasons.

In simple justice, not to mention your own self-interest, I think you *should* for once read this letter. I am not only a customer, but happen to have been one of your earliest supporters. I was all in favor of giving you a chance when you were just an idea pleading for a hearing. I had, at that time, no premonition that you would turn into a gigantic world-devouring monopoly, and I wrote more than my share of letters on behalf of the New Life Bill that finally enabled you to go ahead and show what you could do. Now all *I* am asking of you is a hearing, such as I helped obtain for you.

This is my fifth letter of complaint to you, and I think you had better read this one, at least, carefully. You would not be the first idea to turn into a monopoly and then get shrunk back down to size in a hurry.

To help you get the idea, I want to mention that I AM SENDING COPIES OF THIS LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT, TO APPROPRIATE COMMITTEES OF BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS, AND TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE.

If I now finally have your attention,

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I will mention, parenthetically, that copies are, of course, also going to all appropriate state officials, and there are quite a few of *them*.

Since my four previous letters were answered by routine computer printouts from either your promotion or your legal department, I suppose I had better summarize everything I said in those letters, which have probably long since been shredded and fed to your secretary's cute little lemon-yellow sports coupe.

In chronological order, here is a summary of my four previous letters:

1) "I am a dairy farmer, and recently purchased one of your new model Superbiometal Traction Servalls. As an admirer of your early Biotank models, I want to complain about your phasing out of these models. Their advantage over the usual all-mechanical tractor in times of fuel scarcity was enormous, since at night you could put a stack of hay, corn stalks, straw, wood chips, or what-have-you on the tank-feed mechanism, and in the morning the biotank would have converted the stack into fuel, and the tractor would be ready to go. With one or two supplemental biotanks, most of a farmer's fuel problem was solved. That was good enough, and this new improved series with so-called 'self-repairable modules' represents a complication I don't need and don't want."

2) "I want to again urgently request that you bring back your Biotank model. I could take an ordinary wrench to that model and fix the usual problems. At worst, I could nearly always take it apart and fix it. If, finally, *I* couldn't do the job, I could get hold of someone who could. But if this present Superbiometal thing, with its 'self-repairable modules,' happens to be set wrong at the factory, and I reset it, *it* then reresets itself to the wrong setting, and neither I, nor my brother with forty years experience on engines, nor your biobefuddled Superbiometal factory-trained regional representative, can figure out what to do. At present, it insists on running too rich; nothing we do fixes it; it leaves a rolling cloud of fine soot behind it, and drinks fuel like an eight-armed alcoholic; it runs feebly at best and jolts to a stop with a cough and a hiccup if there's any serious work to be done. I am not the only one with this problem. You had better straighten this out, or you will be hearing from our lawyers. P.S. Do you realize that if a sharp rock gets flung up, this Superbiometal tractor *bleeds!*"

3) "Kindly do not send me any more self-congratulatory press releases, slick brochures on New Superbiometal Products, or threatening legal form letters with enclosures that I am supposed to humbly fill out and send back to you by return mail. Everything non-legal goes straight onto the tank-feed stack. The legal junk goes to my lawyer, who is beginning to wonder whether an actionable case for mail fraud can be built up out of it. Instead of wasting time with all this mulch,

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kindly clear up the problem I have been trying to call to your attention: *Your Superbiometal Traction Servall is a disaster.* I am now farming with my old Biotank model, which is in very worn condition, but which works far better than this fuel-eating soot-machine that can barely crawl around the field. There may be someone who admires your Biotechnological Sophistication, but it isn't me. Don't send me any more slick testimonials from your paid admirers. I know what the truth is: This present model is worthless, and all its 'sophistication' won't grow a hill of beans. Bring back the Biotank model! It *worked.*"

4) "As you will have found out by now, I have traded in your fuel-guzzling Superbiometal Traction Servall for a new improved even-more-sophisticated Superbiometal Powercat. This is no sign of faith on my part so far as the Powercat is concerned. It is just that the Servall was totally worthless, and it seemed that the Powercat might at least be an improvement. It certainly appears 'more aggressive, lean, and powerful,' as your literature claims, but I frankly don't like the looks of the thing. I also don't care for this proliferation of biometal sports coupes, roadsters, and so on. Though I was one of your earliest supporters, I never expected you to rush all this stuff into production. It is perfectly obvious to anyone who uses your products that you are getting results beyond what you are aiming at. This 'biometal' you talk about is not 'the substance of life itself, shaped and formed to serve Man's every need.' The various manifestations of life always serve their *own* needs. Man only gets cooperation when a deal is struck, and then you have to make it satisfactory or the other side won't cooperate. I don't really know how to express what I am trying to say here, so I will try to make it simpler: If you've got an axe, a gun, a wrench, or a crowbar, they may not be 'the substance of life itself,' but you at least know what you've got, and you can use it. On the other hand, if you've got a cow, a dog, a cat, or a chicken, it *is* the substance of life, but again, you've got a fair idea what you've got, and, within reason, again you can use it. But just note that in this latter case, you've got, depending on the specifics, to feed it, pet it, water it, keep it from sinking its teeth into visitors, and shovel out its trough. Now, either category of thing is all right, within its limits, but *you are mixing the categories.* Do you appreciate what you are doing? Do we honestly want the equivalent of meowing crowbars and guns that can fire themselves? Never mind how sophisticated it all is, and what a tribute to Science that we can make them. Of course, it's wonderful. But do we *want* it?"

That is the greatly condensed summary of my past correspondence. There is no point trying to summarize the flood of material, all beside the point, that you have sent in return.

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What is important is what I have been trying to get through to you, and unfortunately I now have a much clearer idea of that than I did the last time I wrote. I no longer have to try to get it across philosophically. Now I can give you examples.

This new Superbiometal Powercat of yours was no sooner in its shed than it gave a noise like a foghorn, and we discovered in the owner's manual that this 'serves as a reminder to load the tank feed.' It gave this 'reminder' at six that night, at ten, at around twenty minutes after midnight, at quarter of three a.m., and then again right on the dot at six the next morning.

It took us most of the next day to cut and weld new rails and push rods for the tank feed mechanism, so that it would be possible to make it hold feed enough to take this monster through the night. In the hope of getting a little peace and quiet, we were loading up this bigger feed rack when there came a thud and a clang, a noise like thirty pounds of muck squelching onto the ground, and a second clang followed by the sound of a latch clicking into place. There was a strong chemical odor, and there on the floor of the shed sat a steaming glob of what looked like lithium gun grease, with odd bits and remnants of straw, corn stalks, and so on sticking out. Excuse me for mentioning it, but this is a complication I don't need from a tractor. I know what to do with cow manure, but what do we do with this stuff?

Searching through the owner's manual, we found that, "the Powercat not only makes its own fuel from ordinary organic farm wastes, but its high-efficiency processing unit is biomechanically scavenged at regular intervals to eliminate the tedious task of cleansing the conversion tank."

Now, putting this description together with what had actually happened, it began to dawn on us that we were in worse trouble than we'd realized. The most innocuous-seeming passages in this manual could cover who-knew-what actual reality? There was, for instance, on page sixteen, the following:

"To maintain operative functioning efficiency, the Superbiometal Powercat must be maintained with adequate in-tank fuel level at all times."

On glancing over this owner's manual, I had supposed that this meant that you couldn't use the thing without putting fuel in it. But that was obvious to begin with. Moreover, the foghorn reminder was there for what purpose? What did "operative functioning efficiency" *mean?*

Could it be that this tractor would *die* if it wasn't fueled?

Just so that you'll have a fair idea what the background was like as we studied this owner's manual, I suppose I should mention that your dealer here took in around twenty of your worthless Servall models, in trade, all in the same week as he sold these Superbiometal Powercats for replacements. So

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there must have been about twenty new Powercats sold around here.

So, from the distance, as we were reading your manual, we could hear hootings, fire-siren howlings, low keenings and moanings — all these things have "individualized aural recognition coding for owner convenience" — and there must have been around a dozen different kinds of this noise to add to the way we felt ourselves.

Well, we finished the manual finally, and we were in none too sweet a mood as we went back to the shed amidst the moanings, hootings, and howlings from the distance, moved the Powercat to the barn and got it positioned so the glop from the conversion tank could at least land in the trough, made sure there was plenty of hay and corn stalks in the tank feed, and then we went to bed still trying in the backs of our minds to work out some of the passages in this owner's manual.

I realize you have to sell your products to keep from going broke. But would it be too much to ask that you put the Biotank model back in production and sell *it?* Progress isn't necessarily making things more complicated, and Progress isn't everything, anyway. If the only way forward is to progress downhill into a swamp, you may be a lot better off to stay where you are, or even back up. The "Tank" model we could *understand,* at least.

Anyway, around two in the morning, there was a noise outside, and a frantic barking from the dog — not a warning, and not a threatening bark at an intruder, but the kind of desperate bark that signifies some kind of disaster that scares the dog himself.

Outside, we could see a kind of vague unrecognizable huge moving shape in the very faint moonlight, with low dark clouds passing across the sky so that, from time to time, it was impossible to see anything at all.

Our car was parked beside the house, and our daughter-in-law's car was parked beside it. Our car is a standard model, four years old. Our daughter-in-law drives one of your new "Biostreaks." This huge shape, whatever it was, was moving toward the cars.

About the time this much was clear, the dog let out a frantic yelp in a higher pitch, there came a rumbling from back toward the barns, and a sort of low hoot from around the cars at the side of the house, and then a threatening foghorn rumble from beside the big barn. I say "threatening" because that was what it was.

Thanks to the noise, we were all up by this time, and things happened so fast it's hard to say what came first.

Someone turned on the outside light by the house, the phone rang, a shot went off somewhere, a horn beeped, and the looming shape by the cars turned out to be one of your competitors' "Nucleogenic Workhog" tractors, with no one driving it. This monstrosity was wheeling itself around the Bio-

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streak car, which was no longer beside our car, but about fourteen or fifteen feet away. From the direction of the barns came the Powercat, which was now emitting a noise like a fire siren on the prowl, and if that isn't clear to you, come on out here and we'll do our best to clear it up.

The Powercat now went for the Workhog, the Biostreak coyly went *beep-beep*, our dog decided which side was which and got the Workhog by a tire, and Ed Cox asked me over the phone if I'd seen his Workhog tractor, which he said had a tendency to "start up and wander off at night."

It's to your credit, at least, that the Powercat ran the Workhog off the place, but what this necessarily involved was that this expensive piece of biomachinery was now running around loose, at night, on what errand we didn't know, and for all we could tell, it might end up wrecked. Naturally, we had to go hunt for it. — Besides, the Workhog could have been laying for it somewhere along the road, and the Workhog is a vicious-looking piece of machinery if we ever saw one, and we didn't care to have that thing win the fight.

Naturally enough, considering the circumstances, we saw no sign of the Powercat, got back worn out, and finally found the Powercat back in the barn contentedly connected up to its feed mechanism; the Biostreak car was demurely parked where it had started the night, and the whole shambles obviously was a figment of our imagination — if it hadn't been for the tracks all over the ground.

Now, that was some time ago, and since then we have kept our eyes and ears open, examined these biogenetically engineered machines, further studied the owners' and so-called "shop" manuals, and come to certain conclusions.

First, we don't think you know what you're actually doing.

Second, you may *think* you've got "the substance of Life itself" warped into the "Service of man," but we think the "substance of Life" is using *you*, not the other way around.

Third, we think we can live with this present generation of Powercats, etc., but there are plenty of disadvantages to a tractor that gives a noise like a foghorn when it's hungry, tomcats all night, and, last but not least, chooses a *car* to mate with.

Fourth, kindly do not tell us there is no possible way a farm tractor can mate with a sports car, as we are bringing several dozen reporters out here tomorrow to see what results. And we further want to advise you that neither we nor anyone we have talked to can think of any use for a low-slung streamlined tractor with four bucket seats and a power take-off.

Fifth, we want to advise you to kindly watch out in your gene-splicing-and-altering to keep your civilian and military applications separate, as, between the lot of us out here, we have

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had to have no less than six different military tank, groundcrawler, and doomsday-type hybrids "humanely put to sleep" shortly after "birth" (what else can we call it?) because there was no possible way we could let these things grow to full size. And I might mention that these are not exactly the easiest kinds of things to "humanely put to sleep," either.

Lastly, let me once again ask you to kindly inquire of yourselves, do we really *want* all this wonderful progress?

Faithfully, but frankly worn-out,
J. J. Wildner
Riveracre Farms

"When you said, 'Someday our ship will come in,' I never dreamed it would be a space ship."

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This is a first sale for P. E. (Pat) Cunningham, who lives in Pennsylvania and writes that she is a 25-year-old English Major, a closet Trekkie, and guardian to a 15-year-old Schnauzer who never learned to like dog food.

Healer

BY

P. E. CUNNINGHAM

He was not in the cave again, nor was he with the other children taking their lessons from the Elders. He was not even at Justin's clearing, listening to the old man's stories. "Try the clifftop," Justin suggested. "A lot of boys like to go up there when they're ducking out of lessons."

Dan found him there, up among the rocks where the pteros dozed, their ribbed wings outstretched to catch every scrap of warmth. Amid the surrounding green, gray, and brown hides of the sleeping reptiles the boy's blond head, touched by sunlight, stood out like a bright beacon. He sat cross-legged with his back to Dan, oblivious to his father's presence. He held a ptero hatchling's tail tenderly in his hands.

The hatchling whined anxiously. "Here, it's just a nick," the boy murmured. "What happened, your nest-brother bite you?" The hatchling uttered a shrill, angry hiss. "Oh, your *sister*." The boy chuckled. Now Dan was close enough to see the shallow triangle gash in the hatchling's tail.

The boy bent low over the ptero. His hands moved. The tiny hatchling whimpered and sank its head between its jutting shoulders.

Dan stepped forward. "Benjamin."

The boy jumped. The hatchling squealed and bolted for the protection of its mother's wings. Dan's eyes flickered after it momentarily. Its tail was uniform green, clear of blemish.

Benjamin got to his feet. His eyes, a clear summer blue, met Dan's in a steady gaze. His mother's eyes, Dan thought, and winced. He steadied himself with effort. "And why aren't you at your lessons?" he said.

"I —" Benjamin darted a glance at the hatchling, now safely hidden beneath a gray female's wing. "He hurt. I

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could hear him all the way down at the altar. I wanted to help."

"Some hatchling's squawk isn't reason enough for you to leave your lessons. If his injury is serious enough, the healer will look after him. You shouldn't —"

"Healer!" Benjamin made a face. "He doesn't know what he's doing. Mother would never have allowed —"

"That's enough!" Dan rasped. His hand constricted sharply on Benjamin's wrist. The boy yipped once and fell silent. Several pteros started and raised their anvil heads. Their stares followed Dan as he hurried to the cliff edge, their golden eyes hard and accusing. *You should not hurt him so,* the voice of the mother ptero touched Dan's mind. *He is only a hatchling, and he means well.*

"I know," Dan muttered. He guided Benjamin to the vine ladder that stretched down the length of the cliff and motioned him onto it. Benjamin dutifully started the downward climb. The gray ptero whistled low thanks to him, and a little squeak of gratitude issued from beneath her left wing. Benjamin waved to them before his head dropped below the cliff's edge.

Dan waited until Benjamin was well on his way before he began his own descent. He wished he could talk to his son as easily as the boy conversed with the pteros. But at times the boy seemed ... strange. In some ways, Benjamin was as alien to his own people as the humans were to the pteros.

* * *

The last lesson for the day was history, and Benjamin hurried down the forest path to Justin's clearing, hoping he was in time. He never voluntarily missed his history lessons, not only because he liked Justin, but also because of the role his family had played in the Chosen's colonization of the Nest.

Doctor Noah Sanderson was the only healer to survive that horrible decimation of the colony of the Church of Progressive Christians, fresh off the starship from Earth. It was Noah who first deduced the secret of the Fever, the alien disease that killed two-thirds of the colonists and opened the minds of the others to the telepathic pteros. Together he and Justin led what was left of "God's Chosen" to new homes in the cliff-caves, and a new way of life.

Benjamin's mental image of his grandfather was a colorful picture drawn from the Elders' stories. His actual memories of Noah were misty and unreal, an infant's perception. Benjamin had not been a year old when Noah died and his healer's implements passed to his daughter, Jessica.

Benjamin blinked rapidly as he trotted along the path. The memories of his mother, and of his mother's death, were still sharp and stinging in his mind. Jessica the healer, who had worked with poisons since childhood, struck down by a rock snake's bite. The bitter irony of it pained him. That, and the choice of her successor.

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Her healer's tools were Jeremiah's now. Benjamin hissed like a ptero. The man was incompetent. So what if his father had been one of Noah's aides? Jeremiah was not his father, and had none of his father's skill. The Chosen could not help but benefit when Benjamin finally reached maturity and demanded to take over his family's profession.

He scuffed to a halt. Voices rang up ahead.

This was not the chatter of children, but adult snarls and accusations. The voices were Justin's, his ptero Zurn's, and a third Benjamin could not immediately place. This voice was close to shouting. Benjamin edged closer and hid himself in the brush.

"Madness," the voice said, "a senile old man's rumblings. That's how the Council will see it."

"Most of them, maybe," Justin admitted. "The others will see the possibility. At any rate, I feel they should be warned."

"Against what? Some irrational fear —"

Not fear. Zurn's telepathic voice, which had stopped Benjamin on the path, now stopped the unknown speaker. *This is inevitable. You remember the older pteros. You saw how we were then: animals with mind-speech and little else, until your human minds awakened us. Our evolution is just beginning. What makes you think yours has ended?*

"Evolution!" the man spat. "Our only 'evolution' came from the Fever. Now that we're acclimated there won't be any further changes."

"But how can you be sure?" Justin said. "C'mon, Enoch, you know she's right. Telepathy was just the start for us. God knows what else the Fever did to our genes, or what our minds have done to the pteros. You remember Est's hatchling, surely."

"No."

"I'll bet you don't. Makes you jittery, doesn't it — a hatchling that couldn't put three words together, moving rocks by thought. We called that telekinesis back on Earth. No ptero's ever had power like that, as anyone could tell you."

"The hatchling died," Enoch said, almost triumphantly.

And if it had not? Zurn asked. *Suppose it had lived, and found a human with similar talents, and they bonded. What would we have then?*

"A freak," Enoch growled, "that would live no longer than Est's damned hatchling. You're not going to find your 'new species' among the Chosen, Justin. Human evolution's gone as far as it's going to go."

That's what the pteros thought, Zurn said, *and look at us now.*

Enoch was silent. "You disappoint me, Enoch," Justin said. "I felt sure you'd back us on this."

"I'm only telling you how the Council will react. We have enough fears already without you adding new ones."

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Bare footfalls thudded on the path, and Benjamin ducked down deeper into the brush. A lean, fuzzily bearded man stormed past. He was dressed in undyed leather; a long knife depended from a loop in his belt. Enoch was leader of the Chosen's hunters and highly influential in Council. Justin must be worried indeed if he would seek out Enoch's support.

There were other voices on the path now, and snatches of children's laughter. Benjamin climbed out of the brush and leaned against a tree. He made a show of searching his boots for stones until his fellow classmates arrived, then ambled into the clearing with the others.

Justin sat on a stump near the remains of his cookfire, muttering nasty things about the Council and rubbing his hands as if they pained him. Benjamin looked at him in awe and thought: this man was born on another world. Justin was all that was left of the Chosen's original colony. He moved more slowly these days, but his grin was still undimmed. His hair was solid white now, minus the few gray streaks it had sported last year, and he had given up trying to trim his beard, letting it wander across his face where it would. The confinement of the caves terrified him. So he lived and gave his lessons in the clearing. He was beloved by everyone, humans and pteros alike, a living legend.

Zurn squatted at his side, resting heavily on her triangle-tipped tail. Her hide was a deep, rich gold, only slightly paler than the color of her eyes. Her neck had grown thicker over the past long months, her claws blunted, and she no longer took to the sky as readily as before. She too was growing old.

"About time you thoughtless twits decided to show up," Justin growled at them good-naturedly. He massaged his fingers again. There *was* something wrong with Justin's hands, Benjamin thought, something in the joints. If he could only touch them, he could —

But Justin was ready to start the lecture, waving them to take seats on the ground. The children arranged themselves before him; sharp-eyed Zurn stood by to prod the inattentive. Benjamin took a seat with the rest, but though his mind absorbed the lesson, his eyes were fixed on Justin's hands.

The Chosen's history on the Nest was brief. At odds with the government because of their religious beliefs, the Church of Progressive Christians had gotten a charter to settle on one of Earth's colony worlds. The planet they were sent to was lush and green, similar to Earth in her prehistoric days, before the rise of man. The world had no native intelligent life — or so the scouts believed.

The colonists had indeed thought the pteros were mere animals. The huge, anvil-headed reptiles, named for the long-extinct Terran pteranodon, showed no signs of curiosity or intelli-

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gence — at least none that the Terrans could interpret as such. The survivors of the Fever, those with the highest psi ratings, soon learned better. Now the symbiotic sharing of lives with the pteros was the only way of life the Chosen knew. Earth was just a myth to them. Justin, who knew mankind's history only too well, had taken it upon himself to keep the myth alive, in the hopes of avoiding repeated mistakes some time in their world's far future.

Today's lesson was supposed to be on Earth's history of atomic wars, but the children managed to divert him into telling them about the mysterious mother planet. "Do the Terrans know we're here?" Naomi asked.

Justin shrugged. "I doubt it. They probably think we're dead. We haven't tried to contact them in quite a while."

"Will they ever come here to look for us?"

"I doubt that too. After all, it's been sixty years. I think we're safe."

Nevertheless, Naomi cast worried glances at the sky, as if she expected to see starships instead of pteros there. Her younger sister, Abigail, timidly raised her hand. "Is it true there were no pteros on Earth?"

Justin grinned at that. "Fraid so. Hasn't been anything like a ptero on Earth for acouple of million years."

"That's horrible!" Naomi cried. "Who did you talk to?"

"Well ... ourselves, mostly."

A hellish world indeed, Zurn observed.

The class exploded in laughter. "And on that note," Justin said, with a raking glare at his ptero, "we'd better call a halt. It's dinnertime anyway. Go on now, off with you."

Giggling, the children scrambled to their feet and disappeared through the forest. Benjamin rose last and started toward Justin.

"Hey, Ben." Cain, a chunky, hard-eyed boy a year older than he, grabbed his arm. "There's no lessons tomorrow. Let's go exploring out on the plains." He tightened his grip. "How about it?"

"Yeah, OK," Benjamin said absently. His attention was focused on Justin's hands. The moment Cain released him he went to the Historian. "Justin?"

"Eh? Oh, hello, Benjamin." Benjamin nodded to him and patted Zurn's beak in greeting. She purred and offered the side of her neck to be scratched. "You're getting big," Justin said. "Shooting up like a weed. What are you now, twelve?"

"Thirteen. I wanted to ask you — your hands —"

"My hands?" Justin held up the offending extremity. "What happened, I grow another finger? The water here does strange things to you —"

"No. They seemed to hurt you. I wondered...."

"Hurt?" Justin's lips stretched in a grimace. "Yes, they do ache a bit. Touch of arthritis. Nothing serious. Comes from being old."

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"Let me see," Benjamin said. "I think I can help."

Puzzled, Justin held out his hand. Benjamin took it between his own. Yes, now he could feel the throbbing in the joints. He pressed lightly, in the manner he had taught himself, and pictured the way Justin's hands should be. Then he set about correcting the error. The other hand was not as bad; that one took only a minute. Benjamin released it and stepped back. "Better now?"

Justin made a hard fist, first with one hand, then the other. Zurn sucked air with a sharp, inward hiss. "Benjamin," Justin said. His voice was strange. "What did you do?"

The boy shrugged. "Something was wrong with your hands. I fixed them." He glanced at the sky and was startled by its dullness. "I've got to go; Father will be looking for me. Bye."

Benjamin waved and raced up the path. The incident had already slipped from his mind. But Justin stared after him for a long time. His hands continued to form and unform fists.

The day dawned brisk and bright, with only a faint foreshadowing in the air of the sweltering heat to come. Cain and his followers, their lunches in leather packs strapped to their backs, set out for the plains. Helpful solos, pteros without a human partner, carried the little expedition over the forest and foothills to their destination. The children thanked them and bid them return to the cliffs. They would have no trouble finding transportation home; there were always pteros around.

Cain's four companions trailed him as he struck out along a deer path skirting the foothills: Abigail, treading carefully beneath Naomi's protective eye; nervous, fair-haired Mark; and Benjamin. "Where are we going?" Naomi demanded.

"Hunt for horses," Cain said, holding up a plaited grass rope. "Bet I can catch one with this."

"Bet you can't. They're too fast for you. Why didn't you ask one of the solos to stay behind?"

"It's no fun on pteroback. You have to catch 'em yourself." He tugged the rope to test its strength, and smiled in satisfaction. "I'll catch one — maybe two. You watch."

Naomi sniffed archly, unconvinced. Benjamin kept his own doubt unvoiced. He was familiar with the pony-sized, three-toed horses that lived in the forests and plains. They were shy and elusive as deer, but fought like wolves when cornered. He hoped he would not be called upon to fix any bites, or bones bruised or broken by kicks.

Mark stopped abruptly, searching the wind. "Something's made a kill up ahead. I smell blood."

Instantly the children froze. Mark was being trained as a hunter, and his nose was especially keen. "What is it?" Abigail asked, trembling. "It's not an

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allosaur, is it?"

"I ... I can't tell. I'd have to see...."

Cain was already scrambling up the hillside for a safe blind among the rocks. Benjamin followed close behind. After a moment's observation the two waved their companions to join them. "It's OK," Benjamin said. "It's pteros — solos, I think. I don't recognize any. They've got a grazer."

The children found comfortable niches in the rocks from which they could spy on the pteros. Abigail, smaller than the others, climbed higher up the hillside and positioned herself atop a large boulder. The entire scene spread out before her. "Oh!"

Naomi was at her side in an instant. "What is it?"

"There!" Abigail cried, pointing. "Oh, look!"

The children's breaths alternately froze and left them in startled *ahhs*. A small flock of pteros crouched beside a grazer carcass. The largest among them was a cunning old male, crystal green with unusually pale eyes. Now Benjamin recognized him — Eshal, a solo who rarely visited the cliffs. The pteros with him were his family — two generations at least, for five of them were adolescents, the other three fully grown. He did not see Eshal's mate among them; no doubt she was on a nest somewhere. His guess was confirmed when Eshal seized a generous hunk of flank in his beak and flapped purposefully into the foothills.

But it was one of the three adults that held the children awestruck. This ptero's hide gleamed pure obsidian black. Such coloration in a ptero was rare; even Justin had seen only one other in his lifetime. As if it knew it were being watched, it raised its ebony head. Benjamin felt the cool breath of its mind as it scanned the plains for danger. Satisfied that all was well, it dipped its beak to feed.

"He's a handsome one, all right," Cain said. "And a solo, too. Bet he's looking for a rider."

"She," Benjamin corrected. The black ptero was female, though he could not have told them how he knew. Fortunately, his friends were too absorbed in the sight to ask. Cain shrugged. "She, then. She's certainly old enough to bond. I think I'll have her."

"Ha!" Naomi's laugh was broad with scorn. "The pteros choose their partners, not the other way around. Surely you remember that last idiot who tried to force a ptero to his will."

Benjamin remembered. He remembered vividly Jethro the hunter, his face in scarlet furrows, his left eye gone, his chest clawed to the ribs. The ptero had maimed him horribly, but Jeremiah's indifference had killed him. "A hopeless case," he said, and all but left him to die. Even now Benjamin was certain he could have saved Jethro's life. The hunter would have been difficult to fix, and that eye was far beyond Benjamin's skill, but at least he would still be alive. Only Ben-

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jamin had never been given the chance. Who would let a twelve-year-old boy near the mortally wounded?

Cain scrabbled down the hillside, the rope in his hand. "Cain, don't!" Mark called out.

"Shhh! You'll scare them off!" Cain hissed. "She won't hurt me. All pteros are looking to bond with a human. She'll have me."

He set off toward the feeding flock. Benjamin half stood, indecisive and afraid. All Chosen knew about bonding, that special mind-to-mind rapport that existed between certain humans and pteros. It always happened spontaneously and could not be forced. If Cain tried to bond himself to the black ptero and she was not receptive, she would kill him.

Frantically Benjamin arrowed his thoughts at the flock. *Don't hurt him!* he pleaded. *Just fly away and don't hurt him. Please.*

The black ptero lifted her head and stared about. Cain froze, convinced she was looking at him. But her gaze was not for him, but for Benjamin. Her golden eyes stared into his, as if she hovered before him and did not in truth sit on the plain almost half a mile away. He tingled at the feathery brush of her mind against his. Then she turned her head away, and it was gone. Now the whole flock was aware of Cain, who stood as if turned to stone. A sleek brown male yawned once and chittered, then climbed into the sky. The five adolescents trailed him like the tail of a kite. The black and her gray-green sister rose lazily, two easy flaps taking them out of reach of Cain's rope. They glided past the rocks before soaring into the foothills; cool mental laughter tickled the children's thoughts. The pteros flipped their tails and disappeared over the hill.

Furious, Cain stalked back to their hiding place. "They didn't see me! I know they didn't! Who warned them? You, Mark? Benjamin?"

"Does it matter?" Naomi said. "They're gone, and I'm glad. She'd've clawed you to pieces if you tried to throw a rope on her. I wish she had. It's just what you would've deserved."

Cain's narrowed eyes, hot with fury, fixed on Naomi. "You! You warned her, didn't you?" He raised the coiled rope like a whip. "I'll make you pay for that!"

Cain brought his arm down with the force of an ax, the rope aimed at Naomi. Panther-quick, Abigail darted between them, grabbing at Cain's wrist. The rope lashed across her face. Screaming, her hands crushed to her eyes, Abigail stumbled and fell against the boulder. Her head hit the rock with a sickening crack. She tumbled down the hillside, to roll to a stop in the tall plains grass, motionless and limp as a broken doll.

Naomi shrieked and sprang down the hill to crouch at her sister's side. Benjamin skidded to an awkward stop beside her. When he reached for Abigail, however, Naomi clawed at him

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like a cat, and would let neither him nor Mark come near. At last Mark took Benjamin by the shoulders and pulled him away. "Help me call for pteros," he said. "We have to get her back to the caves."

He released Benjamin and broadcast his thoughts into the hills, a frantic plea for help. With an effort Benjamin wrenched his gaze from Abigail and stared around for Cain. "This is your fault, Cain!" he cried. "The least you can do is —"

His accusations fell upon the deaf rocks. Cain was nowhere in sight.

Abigail's parents stood in the healer's cave, Naomi clasped between them like some charm to ward off evil. Naomi's eyes and her mother's were red; the father's face was as expressionless as stone, but the pteros whined at his thoughts.

Benjamin and his father stood outside on the ledge. Eshal, murmuring, squatted beside them. It was he, returning to the carcass, who had heard their call for help. He himself bore Naomi and Abigail to the cliffs; his son and gray-green daughter carried Benjamin and Mark. Benjamin had not been able to get near Abigail. Now Jeremiah had her. He shuddered to think what her fate would be in the man's incompetent hands.

He heard the rough sweep of a hide partition being shoved aside and falling shut again. Jeremiah stepped into the cave's antechamber. The slanting sun highlighted his huge teeth, narrow nose, and pockmarked face. "The bleeding's stopped, and I've bandaged her, but she still looks like she's in shock. I'd like to keep her here for a couple of days. She should be fine in a week."

Shock? That was all? — But — Benjamin ducked away from Dan and squeezed past Eshal into the cave. "Have you looked at her head?"

Jeremiah eyed him as if he were a rocksnake. "Of course I did. It was only a scalp wound. In a couple of days —"

Scalp wound? Even without touching it, he knew it was worse than that. "I think you're wrong. Look at her again, carefully, and you'll see —"

Jeremiah seized his shoulder, cutting him off. "Who are you, boy?"

"My name's Benjamin." He added with fierce pride, "Jessica the healer's son."

"Oho, so you're the *healer's* son!" Jeremiah's laugh was raspy. "Think your lineage gives you powers, does it? That God Himself has marked your family alone to heal the sick? Not in this cave, boy. I was chosen for the duty as healer, and I —"

"Healer? You?" Benjamin spat the words. "You aren't fit to touch a bramble scratch, you —"

"Benjamin!" Dan grabbed him by the arms. "What's the matter with you, talking like that to the healer? Apologize at once!"

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"To *him?*"

"Troublemaking little beast," Jeremiah muttered. "I'll let it go this time, Dan. Just get him out of here."

Benjamin started to protest, but his father glowered down at him. Fuming, helpless, he let himself be herded from the cave. Eshal bore them both back to their own dwelling. Benjamin did not look behind him. He did not want to see Naomi's tearful face, or her father's trembling mask of composure, or the smirk he knew must live on Jeremiah's lips.

None of them noticed Zurn, perched on the ledge above the healer's cave. She watched, not the healer, but Benjamin. Her lamplike eyes were thoughtful.

Eshal left them on their own ledge. Dan did not speak until they were inside, after the solo had departed. "And what have you to say for yourself?" Benjamin was silent. "What were you thinking of, to speak that way to Jeremiah? Never mind, I can guess. You don't think he's fit to be healer."

"He isn't! Everyone says so —"

"But 'everyone' also accepts his services because he's all we have. I know how you feel. When you're fifteen, you can be apprenticed to him, if you still —"

"Apprenticed? To that — that allosaur? He's going to let Abigail die, just like he did Jethro!"

"Ben, listen to me." Dan took Benjamin by the arms, so tightly the boy winced. "You've lived too long with fairy tales — overblown stories of Noah and your mother. But they understood the reality of life. Some injuries can't be healed. Sometimes people die. The healer has to accept this. Even Noah lost patients. Even your mother —"

"Mother knew the difference between a scalp wound and a cracked skull!"

"So does Jeremiah. If he says she'll recover, she'll recover. If she doesn't ... Ben, you have to accept —"

"But she doesn't have to die!" Benjamin struggled with tears. "I can fix her. Just let me go down there. I only have to touch her...."

"No. Jeremiah is healer, not you, much as you wish it were different. I don't want you going anywhere near his cave, or near Abigail. I'll set a solo to guard you if I have to. Do you understand?"

Sniffling, Benjamin nodded. Dan offered him lunch, but the boy refused. Instead he crawled into his alcove and threw the curtain shut. Dan gazed at it a moment, shrugged, and went to prepare his own meal.

Full darkness came with the suddenness of a door slamming shut. Dan lit a single lamp and sat alone in its feeble glow. Now and again he glanced at the alcove where Benjamin lay sleeping. The boy had not eaten. Still upset, no doubt, over his playmate. If the girl died ... ah, well, Benjamin was just a

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boy, brought up in worship of a healer mother and a legendary grandfather. In time he would accept the fact that healers were not infallible.

He heard the crack of air at the cave mouth that announced a landing ptero. Dan rose, surprised. Zurn, a pale golden ghost in the moonlight, steadied herself on the wide ledge. She greeted him politely and stepped within the opening, but no further. Her beak explored the scents inside, and her long tail looped upon itself in endless, haphazard patterns. Justin stayed outside, as far from the cave as the ledge would permit. "Good evening, Dan. Is your boy here? Benjamin?"

"He's sleeping." Fear turned his heart to a lump of ice. Fear, and suspicion. "What's he done?"

"Done? Oh, nothing — nothing like what you're thinking. Sleeping, is he? Good. I want to ask you some questions about him."

Dan's hands, tight against his thighs, formed fists. Zurn uttered the ghost of a hiss. "Did the Council send you?"

"They don't know a thing about it. Now tell me this — and this is important — he ever have any scratches? Broken bones?"

His hands fell open of their own volition. "What?"

"Think now. He's a normal, active boy — jumps around on rocks and in trees and rips his clothes on brambles. A boy his age gets a new bump or bruise once a week, at least. Ever seen one on his skin, or any kind of injury?"

Warning bells went off in Dan's mind, but they were faint, unsure of what they were warning against. Of course Benjamin was a normal boy. He must have collected his share of scrapes over the last few years.

He must have, but he had not.

Zurn nodded. Her eyes were supernally bright.

"Thought so," Justin said. "I've been asking around. He's got quite a reputation with the kids and young pteros. Any time anyone's got a cut, or even a broken finger —"

"What are you driving at? He's never —"

"Whoa, Dan, cool down! I didn't say he *caused* those things. He *fixes* 'em. He's a healer."

"But ... Jeremiah took Jessica's things. Benjamin wouldn't steal —"

Jeremiah, Zurn snarled. She made it a curse. *That bumbler. Your hatchling doesn't need such clumsy tools. He heals with his mind.*

Justin held up his hand, a withered stick sporting five dry twigs. He curled it into a ball and opened it again. "Yesterday," he said, "I had a case of arthritis. I could barely move my fingers, much less make a fist. Benjamin healed me. I watched — I *felt* him do it. He healed me."

Dan's voice cracked like dead leaves. "No."

We've suspected you humans were mutating, Zurn said, *just as we pteros are mutating. Benjamin is proof of*

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this. Your species and ours are still evolving. If —

"He's not a freak!"

"Of course not," Justin soothed. "He's a — call him the vanguard of a new species. He's got some form of telekinesis that works on the cellular level. He's channeled it into healing because that's what his family does. His potential is —"

"What do you intend to do with him?"

The words shattered in the air, brittle as ice. Zurn snaked her head back and moved between Justin and Dan. Justin stepped as close to the cave mouth as he could stand. "I'm not going to hurt him, Dan, or hold him up for everyone to gawk at. I just want to talk to him."

"And after that?"

"The Council will have to be told. I wanted to bring this up anyway, eventually — the possibility of further mutation — and now that it's actually happened —"

"You're forgetting something important, Historian. Benjamin is underage. Until he reaches fifteen, I make all his decisions. And I've decided he's not going to talk to you. Now get out. Benjamin will take his history from one of the other Elders."

Fool! Zurn snapped. *The boy is —*

"No, Zurn." Justin tugged at her tail. "I'm sorry if we disturbed you, Dan. But it wouldn't hurt to think about what we've said. C'mon, old girl, let's go."

Zurn backed from the cave, her hot sulfur eyes on Dan. Justin mounted quickly; they fled the caves with almost tangible relief. Dan himself felt no less relieved at their going. He peered outside to make sure they were gone before he crept to the alcove. He inched the curtain back. Benjamin slept with his face to the wall, one arm thrown above his head. He looked no different than any other child, any other normal boy.

A boy whose skin had never hosted a cut or a scratch, or even so much as a bruise.

Dan went to the cave mouth and stood staring out at the night. He was not thinking of a sleeping boy or of an old man's words. He was thinking of a hatchling's tail.

Benjamin heard his father's footsteps stop at the mouth of the cave. Their ordinary sound seemed anticlimactic in the wake of Justin's words. Justin must truly believe this matter was of vital importance to the Chosen; nothing less could have dragged him to the caves.

Healer. The word, as Zurn and Justin used it, took on a new connotation. Benjamin had never questioned his ability to make his own small hurts go away and to "fix" the injuries of others. If what Justin said was true, his talent made him a healer in a fuller sense than Jeremiah, with his ill-used knives and needles. It also made him —

His mind skittered away from Jus-

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tin's description. *Mutation.* It had such an ugly sound. A mutation was no more than a freak, like that hatchling of two years ago, with two heads and malformed wings, mercifully dead in the egg. Or Est's poor hatchling, who moved things by thought, whose undeveloped, tiny brain burned out, overloaded by the power it carried.

The pteros never spoke of these two. What would they say about him?

Still ... Justin and Zurn did not think him a monster, and the Chosen held them in great respect. Surely they could convince the Council and his father to let him continue to heal. All he wanted was to follow the path of Noah and Jessica. His methods might be unorthodox, but surely they would not forbid him to use them.

Whatever the Council's decision, and no matter what his father decided for him, there was one more healing he had to perform.

Benjamin shut his eyes. In his mind Abigail lay before him, her face washed clean of color, her dark hair bloody at the roots. Jeremiah was wrong about her injury. He could not leave her to die at his hands.

He feigned sleep again when his father checked in on him before seeking out his own cot. Benjamin waited until Dan's breathing slowed and deepened with sleep, then crept from his alcove to the vine ladder that hung beside the cave mouth. He swung himself onto it and began to climb downward, toward the healer's cave.

* * *

Benjamin carefully eased himself onto the empty ledge. He thanked the God the Chosen brought with them from Earth that Jeremiah lived pteroless. No reptile eyes would stab the dark to find him as he worked, and no ptero's cry would betray him to its partner. Silent as mist, he slipped inside.

Jeremiah's cave was dark, save for a tallow candle in the antechamber and whatever starlight could reach beyond the entrance. A hide partition separated the anteroom from the cave proper. Benjamin took up the candle and cautiously entered the healer's sanctum.

Jeremiah lay sprawled on a cot just beyond the curtain. His snores could have waked a hatchling in the egg. A burning lamp sat on a table. Its thin light winked with metal brightness on Jessica's usurped tools, lying exposed on a length of treecloth flung carelessly over the tabletop. Benjamin passed them by; he did not need them. Holding the candle before him, he crossed to the other side of the chamber, where Abigail lay.

She was huddled on a cot beneath rough blankets. Her face was drawn and white as the candle, and her eyes twitched in feverish dreams beneath tissuey lids. Benjamin set the candle down and knelt beside her. Tenderly he undid the bandage and placed his hands over the exposed wound. His eyes slitted and grew blind to every-

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thing but her injury.

He could see the problem now. The bump had put pressure on her brain. He eased the swelling and cleaned the traces of blood from her scalp. She had a sprain in her shoulder, too; he fixed that with ridiculous ease. Her bruises —

No. Something was wrong. The head wound healed, she should have awakened by now. Instead she lay still as death, barely breathing. Frantic, he probed her head with his fingers. This time she stirred at his insistent touch and moaned aloud but quieted without regaining consciousness. He got a bare glimpse of her injury, coiled in her brain like a rocksnake. It was not enough.

Injuries of the flesh — cuts he could see, bones he could feel — he had always healed with no difficulty. Abigail's hurt was hidden by her skull, beyond the reach of his eyes and touch. Benjamin began to tremble, biting back a frightened sob. If he didn't heal it —

"You swamp lizard! What are you doing here?"

The hand that grabbed him by the neck jolted him like a shock. Jeremiah dragged him to his feet. "So! Jessica's brat. The *healer's* son. Think you know my trade better than I do, eh?"

Jeremiah struck him across the mouth and flung him away from the cot. Benjamin crashed into the table; Jessica's thin healer's knives clattered on the stony floor. "I ought to slit your throat, you little beast!" the healer hissed. "Interfering little —"

Benjamin staggered erect, clinging to the table. He healed the cut automatically. "Her head," he moaned, with a weak gesture at Abigail. "Something's wrong inside, under the bone. She'll die if you don't do something."

"Oh?" Jeremiah sneered. "What's wrong, healer's son? Couldn't you fix it yourself? I'll fix *you*, you rat's mistake."

Benjamin stared at him in disbelief. Jeremiah did not care if Abigail lived or died. All that mattered was that he retain his position as the Chosen's only healer. He plucked up the candle and came at Benjamin, the burning wick aimed at the boy's face.

Rage, hot and poisonous as rocksnake venom, fired Benjamin's blood. When Jeremiah struck he dodged, then seized the man's wrist between his hands. He felt the smooth, plump skin beneath his fingers, tingling with life, and wished it dead. The skin roughened and cracked in long, deep bloody fissures that raced greedily from wrist to shoulder. Through the ruined flesh hard bone pressed against Benjamin's hands. He slashed at it and felt it shatter in two explosive cracks like the roar of a gun.

That last, solid snap shocked Benjamin back to himself. He dropped Jeremiah's wrist as if it had burst into flame. The healer fell to his knees, howling like a dog, his ruined arm cradled against his side. Outside, awaken-

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ed by his screams, startled pteros chittered questions and began to drop from the clifftop.

Horror flooded through Benjamin then, as swiftly as his now-vanished rage. He whirled and bolted for the ladder. Before the first ptero reached the healer's cave, Benjamin was on the ground and pounding for the forest. Their attention focused on the healer, they did not even see him go.

Benjamin ran blindly down the narrow path. He neither knew nor cared where he went, as long as it was far from the cliffs. When the path gave out, he simply collapsed and fell on his stomach, sobbing.

Jeremiah's shattered arm swam before his eyes. His mind was sick with the memory. He had never used his talent like that before, to destroy. Even now, self-conditioned instincts urged him back to the cave, to repair the hideous damage he'd done.

And what then? He had attacked the healer; the Council would not let that go unpunished. True, he had acted in self-defense ... but so had the ptero that savaged Jethro. After the hunter's death the flock had taken him away and he was never again seen at the cliffs.

They won't punish you. You were frightened and didn't realize your abilities. It won't happen again.

He could tell them that, of course. But would they believe him? Did he believe it himself? After all, he was a freak, a — mutation — gifted or cursed by God with a horrible power. Until now he had used it only for healing. But would a day come when, driven by anger or jealousy or fear, he would take a man's head between his hands, feel living bone writhing in his grip, and —

Never. That's not within your nature. You're a healer.

He snorted. Healer. Had Noah ever destroyed a man's arm? Had Jessica? What would they think of this freak who made a mockery of their memory? Perhaps it would be best to go back, face the Council's punishment, at least restore honor to his family. Perhaps better still to go to the river, where the water ran deep....

No, you mustn't! Let me help you.

Benjamin yelped, startled. The voice he'd been arguing with had not come from within his own mind, but from outside. It urged him back along the path, to a place where the trees thinned to admit full moonlight. Curious, drawn by it, he went.

She waited for him in the clearing, her wings folded in at rest, her anvil head a slash against the sky. Her rich black hide was a starless void, lit only by twin gold suns, her eyes. She extended her beak to catch his scent; her mind quested for his. *Benjamin?*

He took a tentative step toward her, both fascinated and confused. "Who — how did you find...?"

The black ptero chuckled. Her

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mental voice was sweet and melodious, that of a young girl perched on the brink of womanhood. *We met on the plain, remember? My father told me what happened to your friend. I wanted to help. My name is Pelli.*

Her name sparked a tingle in his thoughts, like that he'd felt on the plain. He found he could see into her mind, with an ease he had never experienced with any other ptero. *I was flying to the cliffs when the ruckus broke out,* she continued. *Even with all that going on, your thoughts stood out. So I followed you. Is there anything I can do?*

"That depends," Benjamin said bitterly. "Are you a miracle worker?" And he sobbed out to her the day's events, from Abigail's fall to Justin's visit, to his attack on the healer, and his failure. "I can't see her wound or touch it. It's inside, beyond my reach. But if I don't heal her, she'll die!"

Pelli leaned toward him and rubbed the side of her beak against his cheek. His hands caressed her sinuous neck, dry and smooth and warm. *I have some skill in that area,* she said. *Maybe if I —*

Suddenly her head snapped up; she tilted it slightly, as if listening. Whispers of thought from her mind echoed through Benjamin's. "What's wrong?"

The nest. There's been an accident.

She unfolded her wings with a loud leather crack and flexed them for flight. Benjamin caught her shoulder and wing-arm and hoisted himself onto her back. He barely had time to tighten his knees before she was airborne, the ground only a memory to her reaching wings. The boy bent low across her neck. They streaked for the hills like a meteor.

Another ptero awaited them, hovering over a jumble of boulders. It was the brown male, Eshal's son. His pale eyes were wild. *Zall, what's happened?* Pelli demanded.

One of the Chosen's hatchlings. Down there.

He dipped one wing and dropped sideways, at the last instant flinging his feet forward to catch a clawhold on the rocky ledge. Pelli glided in beside him. They stood on a half-circle of rock, sheared away into a miniature cliff that dropped straight down some dozen yards. Thick brush and the angling branches of trees hid it from all but the keenest eyes.

Benjamin, clinging tightly to Pelli's back, peered at the darkness around him. Most of the shadows belonged to the brush; but one, larger and deeper than the rest, lay under a huge, upthrust boulder. The strong, musky odor of reptile clung to the rock. Benjamin's mind picked up the darting, frightened thoughts of adolescent pteros, and he saw within the cave two bright, unwinking dots of light — the flat, wary eyes of the mother. She hissed once, low and menacing. The adolescents fell silent. Benjamin shuddered and slid his stare away.

Pelli stretched her neck out over the

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cliff. Benjamin's pain darted up and down his left leg. He closed his mind against the discomfort, and it stopped. It was not his pain; he received it from Pelli. Yet a quick touch told him there was nothing wrong with her.

Yes, I can feel him, Pelli said. *Where'd he come from?*

I don't know. Zall shifted constantly from foot to foot, and his tail snaked around his legs as if with a will of its own. *We heard him blundering around, but he didn't seem to be looking for us. So we let him be. Then suddenly there he was, right in front of the cave. You know how touchy Mother is, with the eggs and all. She attacked him. He tried to run from her, and fell — there. Father and Bresa have gone for the healer. I thought you'd want to look at him before they got here, Pelli.*

"The healer's had an accident," Benjamin said. A bitter, stillborn smile twitched at one corner of his mouth. "Is there a way down?"

Hold on.

Pelli soared out over the cliff, then swung around and came in low. She landed awkwardly, ducking branches. Benjamin slid to the ground. He had to pick his way over torn branches and fallen rock to reach the body inside. Pelli, too large to fit through the brush-choked hole, followed him with her thoughts. *Can you see him?*

"Yes." He looked down at the waxy face. He had already guessed its identity. Cain. Driven by his fear and guilt, he must have wandered around in the foothills for hours, until chance, or perhaps the strong smell of ptero, brought him to Eshal's hidden nest. The Chosen would forgive a mother on a clutch for flying at the intruder ... if he lived.

Zall whistled from above. *Have you found him yet? Is he all right? Bring him out of there. Maybe we can —*

No! Pelli shrilled in alarm. *His back is broken; we don't dare move him. We'll have to leave him until the healer comes.*

Benjamin gaped, first at Cain, then at the black ptero. There was nothing in Cain's position to indicate spinal injury. "How do you know his back's broken. Are —?" His eyes flew wide. The words clogged in his throat, unable to escape. Pelli saw them in his mind and laughed, a musical little trill.

No, I'm not a healer, not like you are. But I can feel ... wrongness ... in a person or ptero, and know what causes it. It's a talent I have.

A talent — like his. If she could indeed find hidden hurts, if her mental eyes could see where his could not — "Can you tell me where his injuries are? Can you help me heal him?"

I'll try.

Benjamin knelt at Cain's side. The boy lay unconscious. His left leg, partially hidden by the grass, was twisted at an odd angle. That was nothing; it could wait. Benjamin placed his hands on Cain's sides, edging his fingers as far underneath the boy's back as he could without actually turning him over. If

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Pelli was right, if the spine was broken, any movement could be disastrous. This peripheral touch would have to be enough.

It wasn't. The flesh Benjamin touched was firm and healthy, if somewhat damp and chilled from lying so long on the ground. But just beyond his fingertips he sensed softness and decay, like a pulpy bruise on a piece of fruit, bone and nerves crying out in agony. No matter how he worked his fingers, he could not come any closer to the wound. To reach the break, he would have to move Cain and risk leaving him paralyzed for life.

He shut his eyes and moved his fingers back. "Pelli," he whispered, "I'm blind. Help me."

All was still, as if time stopped. Pelli's slow breathing, near-silent though it was, filled his ears like an allosaur's roar. Then her breathing was with him, within him, as she touched her mind carefully to his. She opened her psychic eyes and let him look.

Benjamin staggered as Cain's body sprang out in sharp relief before his awakened sight. The skeleton was a black-branched tree, leafed with woven clumps of muscles and twisting twigs of nerves, through which blood pulsed and ran like sap in spring. This first explosive image dimmed, until all Benjamin could see was a section of vertebra, out of kilter from the rest, sheathed in a raw, red glow. Cain's left leg burned with similar nerve fire. Sympathetic pain settled on Benjamin's own spine, and darted like hot needles in his leg.

He opened his mouth to cry out. Pelli, anticipating his plea, shifted her full attention to the spine. The pain in his leg receded, leaving his senses focused on his back. With one hand exploring his empathic injury, the other still touching Cain's side, Benjamin set to work.

He could see as well as feel the problem now. By a miracle, the spinal cord was untouched, but the cracked vertebra lay atop it. He would have to ease the bone back into place without severing the spinal nerves. With sight but no touch it would be difficult, but not impossible.

Benjamin's telekinetic hands closed around the bone. With infinite care he jostled it from its resting place and worked it back in line with the rest of the vertebrae. Once there, he would spur the cells to growth and lock the errant bone back into the spine.

He paused to catch his breath, and lost his grip. The bone slipped free. Blinding pain stabbed his lower back, and his legs went numb.

Don't panic, Pelli's calm thoughts drowned his initial terror. *You've only scratched the nerve, not cut it. It can be repaired. Can you see it?*

"Yes...." The nerve flared firebright before his/Pelli's eyes. Psychic fingers held it together while he returned the vertebra to its rightful place, this time in a steadier grip. Stimulated by his mind, cell reproduction ran wild.

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The nerve rebuilt and rebridged itself in the space of only a minute. The unhealthy red glow faded, and sensation returned to his legs.

He focused his full power on the spine. New cells ran like fluid, sealing the break. Gradually the sick red color dulled to match the skeleton's uniform, normal black. Benjamin ran his hand up his own spinal column, his other hand up Cain's side. He located and healed three hairline cracks, then moved on to the leg.

By now he was gasping for breath through a dry throat, and his face was sheened with sweat. Aware of the drain their link caused him, Pelli shut her mental eyes and withdrew. That left Benjamin alone with the leg, but this injury he could touch. As physical fingers passed over the surface, fingers of energy lifted and set the bone. Grow, he whispered to the cells. Grow and reproduce. Heal.

It was done. The bone was solid once again, not even a seam to show where the break had been. *That about does it,* Pelli said, *except for scrapes. You'd better let him handle those.*

Benjamin nodded wearily and leaned back. His tongue felt dry as a lump of sand in his mouth. He hadn't strength left to deal with a bruise. Even so, he smiled. "We did it, Pelli. We —"

Movement shook loose a shower of dirt and rubble from the top of the cliff. Benjamin jerked his head up, startled; he had forgotten all about Zall. But the voice that called to them was not the brown ptero's. *Daughter? Are you there?*

Here, Father. Is the healer with you?

The healer was injured. He couldn't come. How's the hatchling?

Pelli cocked her head at Cain. *Asleep.* Her eyes smiled into Benjamin's as she relayed the story to her father. Eshal's voice held a similar smile. *So this is where the other hatchling got to! There's a search on for you, young one; the whole Council's abroad. Your father's frantic with worry.*

Benjamin dragged himself to his feet. His effort with Cain had all but driven the memory of Jeremiah from his mind. He would have to go back, he decided, face the Council's punishment. But first there was something else he had to do. He stroked the horn-hard smoothness of Pelli's midnight beak. "Are you up to another healing?"

I could manage it.

"Good." He called up the cliff, "Pelli and I are going back to the caves — to see Abigail."

Pteros screamed and their riders shouted as Benjamin and Pelli, flanked by Eshal and Zall, returned to the cliffs. Bresa, bearing a sleepy Cain, trailed them; she veered off to bring him home. The others angled for Jeremiah's cave. Solos flew to intercept them, but Zall and Eshal warned them off while

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Pelli and Benjamin landed.

The ledge was occupied. Enoch, spear in hand, stood guard. Dan was with him. Zurn, Justin's eyes and ears in the caves, crouched to one side. Enoch arched an eyebrow at the sight of a black ptero, but did not comment on it. "So," he said to Benjamin, "we thought you'd be back. Is Jeremiah's accusation true? Did you attack him?"

Benjamin was careful not to look at Dan, though he was all too well aware of his father's eyes upon him. "Yes," he said, but added quickly, "it was an accident. I can fix it, and Abigail, too, if you'll let me in."

"What, turn you loose to do more damage? I don't think so, boy. Now come with me. You're wanted by the Council."

Wait. Zurn stood. *He says he can help Abigail. I think we should give him the chance.*

"You mean a chance to 'help' her like he did the healer? The Council's labeled him dangerous. We must —"

Fagh! Use what brains your God's given you, Enoch. What harm can he do, with all of us watching him?

"What harm? Didn't you see the mess he made of Jeremiah's arm? The boy's a threat to our safety!"

"Threat or not," Dan spoke up suddenly, "he's still my son, and the son of the healer, Jessica, as well. If he has even a fraction of his mother's skill, then he can do more for that girl in there than Jeremiah ever could. I say give him the chance." His eyes held Enoch's steadily. "I'll take the responsibility."

Pelli already stood in the cave mouth. *I can feel it from here,* she said. *In her brain — oh, the poor little hatchling —!* She ducked into the cave, Zurn a step behind her. Enoch grasped his spear, glaring at Dan. "If something goes wrong...." He let the threat hang in the air behind him as he entered the healer's cave.

Dan and Benjamin were left on the ledge, staring at each other. "Father," Benjamin began.

"Don't," Dan cut him off. "Just tell me — is it true you did — that — to Jeremiah's arm? And you can ... fix it again?" Hesitantly, Benjamin nodded. "It's true then, what Justin said. I've been thinking about that all night. Ben, I ... I'm not sure what you are, or what it is you do, but I won't try to stop you now. In fact, I doubt if I could ... any more than the Council could stop your mother from taking Noah's place when he died. Go ahead, son. Do what you have to."

They hugged each other fiercely close. Then Pelli called from within the cave. Benjamin eased himself free of his father and went inside to join her.

The black ptero leaned over Abigail, the tip of her beak brushing through the girl's hair. *I see what you mean,* she said. *She's got a blood clot in her brain, beneath the skull where you couldn't see it. I've already pinpointed it. Are you ready?*

Benjamin took a deep breath, let it

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out slowly. "I'm ready."

He sat cross-legged beside Pelli. Enoch, spear at the ready, watched them both warily.

Abigail's brain sprang out in sharp clarity before Benjamin's inner eye. The clot, a thick mass of poisonous blue, squatted in her brain just below where the bump had been. Benjamin's earlier healing had relieved the pressure, but not before the inner damage was done. Now he could finish the job.

He cut the rotted cells away with a mental scalpel. He could not remove the clot, but he could slice it into bits small enough for her blood to cleanse. Fresh growth, fed by repaired blood vessels, began to seep into the healed area. *There may be some minor damage,* Pelli said, *but she should recover now. Ah! We'd better get out. She's waking up.*

They withdrew. Abigail stirred and opened her eyes. She blinked and stared up at him, then at Pelli. "Oh ... oh, Ben, she's beautiful. Is she yours?"

"Uh ... sort of. We —" Abigail was already sinking back into healing sleep. Benjamin tried to stand, and staggered. Pelli's tail supported him. *Are you all right?*

He kept himself erect by force of will. "One more thing," he grated. "I can do this one myself."

Benjamin patted Pelli's neck and purposefully crossed the cave until he stood before Jeremiah. The man cringed behind Zurn. "Don't let him touch me," he whimpered. "Demon —"

Zurn caught the healer in her tail and held him fast. Benjamin took Jeremiah's arm, sling and all, into his hands. He could feel the damage even through the bandages. Working slowly, feeling his way, Benjamin reversed the terrible effects of his rage — first knitting the shattered bones, then restoring life and smoothness to the skin. With Zurn's help he got the bandage off. Jeremiah's arm sat in his hands, pink and healthy, as if it had never been broken. "Mother of God!" Enoch whispered, and made the sign of the cross. Dan stared, transfixed with wonder. Zurn chuckled.

Jeremiah saw nothing of this miracle. The moment Benjamin touched him he had fainted dead away.

The boy stepped back and swayed. Dan caught him. "Ben," he murmured. "Son...."

Benjamin sank gratefully into his father's arms. A ptero blacker than Pelli dropped down for him out of the darkness, and he rode it into peaceful oblivion.

He opened his eyes to blackness and a pressure against his side. Light danced off the blackness with a sheen like scales. He realized he was looking at Pelli's hide; the pressure was her sleeping body, nestled against his. He lay in the alcove in his own cave, a blanket thrown over him. The curtain was gone, ripped down by Pelli's claws; she would provide all the privacy he wanted.

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Voices drifted into the cave from the ledge. Dan was out there, and Enoch, and — miracle of God! — even Justin. Instantly Benjamin shielded his thoughts. Justin's presence meant Zurn's also, and he wanted to listen in without revealing himself. Zurn's mental ears were sharp.

"Still asleep, eh?" Justin said. "I'm not surprised. Well, Enoch?"

"Well, what?" the hunter countered. "What is it you want to hear?"

"That you'll support me in Council when I present my case. I'm sure, after Benjamin's demonstrations, they'll be more than willing to listen."

"He won't be punished?" Dan's voice quavered with fear for his son.

No one will touch him, Zurn promised. *We pteros will see to that. Your hatchling is our future.*

"*I* don't see much of a future in this," Enoch grumbled. "Just because the boy —"

But it isn't just the boy, Zurn pointed out. *It's Pelli too. Her existence proves our case.*

"Oh, yes, Pelli — the 'empath,' as you call her. What now, Justin? Are you going to try to bond them, just to support your notions?"

"They're already bonded, Enoch; even you can see that much. We've got something unique here now, and we'll have to handle it like ptero eggs. The potential of that boy and that ptero is incredible — and it could have been destructive, as well. You saw Jeremiah's arm. We were lucky this time. Benjamin's power is constructive. The next one's may not be. We'll have to keep a close watch on the kids and the hatchlings from now on. No telling when or where the next one will turn up."

"You seem sure there's going to be a 'next one.'"

As surely as eggs hatch, Zurn said. *We should have taken our warning from Est's hatchling. Fortunately, things worked out. Will you stand by us in Council, Enoch?*

"Do I have a choice?" By the color of his tone Benjamin knew the hunter had been won over. "I'm still not sure of your theories, Justin, but I can't ignore what I've seen with my own eyes. Maybe it *could* happen. Now that you've got an example to show them, the Council may believe you."

"You're not going to use him," Dan said hotly, "not put him up for display like some — some freak."

"That's not at all what I had in mind, Dan, and you know it," Justin said. "I had a more productive future planned for him. I'm going to propose we make him the Chosen's official healer. That way he can do what he does best, and we can keep an eye on him. I'm sure the Council will go along with that."

Benjamin's heart leaped. Healer! Not just fixing the cuts of his careless friends, but treating all the Chosen injured. Like his grandfather and his mother.

"We'll have to watch Pelli, too,"

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Justin went on, "especially if she mates and produces a clutch. I hope they'll go along with her as his assistant. A doctor's not much good without his X-ray machine."

Enoch frowned. "His what?"

"An old Earth device. Forget it. Dan, you're still his guardian until he turns fifteen. Are you willing to go along with this?"

"I don't know. He's just ... no, he's not a boy anymore. All right, Justin, you old lizard, you've won. I'll talk it over with him as a matter of course, but I think I know what he'll say."

"So do I, if he's got as much of Noah in him as I think he does. So, gentlemen, now that we've got *that* settled, Zurn and I are heading out of here. These caves make me twitchy."

Enoch laughed. Zurn's claws scraped stone; she grunted as she lifted off, her broad wings fanning the air. Vines creaked and booted feet slapped rock as Enoch descended the ladder. Dan entered the cave. Benjamin yawned loudly and essayed an exaggerated stretch, as if he were just coming awake. Instantly Pelli snapped to alertness. *I'm sorry. Did I wake you?*

"No." He patted her wing. She rose and moved to a concave section of wall near the entrance that she had already marked as her own. Dan watched her with an amused glint in his normally solemn eyes. "For a solo from the foothills she's taken to cave life remarkably well."

Pelli stretched her beak wide in a yawn. *Pteros have been living in caves since long before the Chosen came. And I don't think the term "solo" applies to me anymore.* She settled herself against the wall and was asleep again in a second.

Dan grinned and gripped his son's shoulder. "Ben ... God, you must be starving; you've slept for a day and a half. Would you like something to eat?"

Benjamin's stomach roared. "Yes. Please."

Dan looked down at his son. "I wish your mother were here," he said. "Do you know you have her eyes?"

He left, and Benjamin lay back down again. His fondest dream was realized. Soon he and Pelli would tread the path of Noah and Jessica, serving the Chosen as his family always had, as the Healer.

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A new tale of the sea from Jane Yolen, whose latest book is a comic space adventure for children titled COMMANDER TOAD AND THE PLANET OF THE GRAPES *(Coward, McCann & Geoghegan).*

Sule Skerry

BY

JANE YOLEN

Mairi rowed the coracle with quick, angry strokes, watching the rocky shoreline and the little town of Caith perched on its edge recede. She wished she could make her anger disappear as easily. She was sixteen, after all, and no longer a child. The soldiers whistled at her, even in her school uniform, when she walked to and from the Academy. And wasn't Harry Stones, who was five years older than she and a lieutenant in the RAF, a tail gunner, mad about her? She knew he would have asked her Dad for her hand, though she was too young yet, a school girl. Whenever he came to visit, he brought her something. Once even a box of chocolates, though they were very dear.

But to be sent away from London, to her Gran's house, to this desolate, isolated Scottish sea town because of a few German raids when she could have helped, could have at least cooked and taken care of the flat for her father because the help had all gone off to war jobs. To be there in case a bomb *did* fall, so she could race out and help evacuate all the poor unfortunates, maybe even win a medal, and wouldn't Jenny Eivensley look green then. But he had sent her off, her Dad, and Harry had agreed, even though it meant they couldn't see each other very often. It was not in the least fair.

She pulled again on the oars. The little skin boat tended to wallow and needed extra bullying. It wasn't built like a proper British rowboat. It was roundish, shaped more like a turtle shell than a ship. Mairi hated it. Hated all of the things in Caith. She knew she should have been in London helping rather than wallowing in a coracle. She pulled on the oars and the boat shot ahead.

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The thing about rowing, she reminded herself, was that you watched where you had been, not where you were heading. She could see the town, with its crown of mewing seabirds, disappear from sight. Her destination did not matter. It was all ocean anyway — cold, uninviting, opaque; a dark green mirror that reflected nothing. And now there was ocean behind as well as ahead, for the shore had thinned out to an invisible line.

Suddenly, without warning, the coracle fetched up against a rock, a series of water-smoothed amphibious mounds, that loomed up out of the sea. Only at the bump did Mairi turn and look. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a quick scurry of something large and grey and furry on the far side of the rocks. She heard a splash.

"Oh," she said out loud. "A seal!"

The prospect of having come upon a seal rookery was enough to make her leap incautiously from the coracle onto the rock, almost losing the boat in her eagerness. But her anger was forgotten. She leaned over and pulled the little boat out of the water, scrapping its hull along the grey granite. Then she upended the coracle and let it dry, looking for all the world like a great oozing tortoise drying in the hazy sun.

Mairi shrugged out of her mackintosh and draped it on the rock next to the boat. Then snugging the watchcap down over her curls and pulling the bulky fisherman's sweater over her slim hips, she began her ascent.

The rocks were covered with a strange purple-grey lichen that was both soft and slippery. Mairi fell once, bruising her right knee without ripping her trousers. She cursed softly, trying out swear words that she had never been allowed to use at home or in Gran's great house back on shore. Then she started up again, on her hands and knees, more carefully now, and at last gained the high point on the rocks after a furious minute of climbing that went backwards and sideways as often as it went up.

The top of the gray rocks was free of the lichen and she was able to stand up, feeling safe, and look around.

She could not see Caith, with its little watchful wind-scored houses lined up like a homefront army to face the oncoming tides in the firth, with Gran's grand house standing on one side, the sergeant major. She could not even see the hills behind, where cliffs hunched like the bleached fossils of some enormous prehistoric ocean beast washed ashore. All that she could see was the unbroken sea, blue and black and green and gray, with patterns of color that shifted as quickly as the pieces in a child's kaleidoscope. Grey-white foam skipped across wave tops, then tumbled down and fractured into bubbles that popped erratically, leaving nothing but a greyish scum that soon became dark water again. She thought she saw one or two dark seal heads in the troughs of the waves, but they never came close enough for her

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to count. And overhead the sky was lowering, a color so dirty, it would have made even the bravest sailor long for shore. There was a storm coming, and Mairi guessed she should leave.

She shivered, and suddenly knew where she was. These rocks were the infamous Sule Skerry rocks that Gran's cook had told her about.

"Some may call it a rookery," Cook had said one morning when Mairi had visited with her in the dark kitchen. Cook's cooking was awful — dry, bland, and unvaried. But at least she knew stories and always imparted them with an intensity that made even the strangest of them seem real. "Aye, some may call it a rookery. But us from Caith, we know. It be the home of the selchies who are men on land and seals in the sea. And the Great Selchie himself lives on that rock. Tall he is. And covered with a sealskin when he tumbles in the waves. But he is a man for all that. And no maiden who goes to Sule Skerry returns the same."

She had hummed a bit of an old song, then, with a haunting melody that Mairi, for all her music training at school, could not repeat. But the words of the song, some of them, had stuck with her:

> An earthly nourrice sits and sings,
> And aye she sings, "Ba, lily wean!
> Little ken I my bairn's father,
> Far less the land that he staps in."
>
> Then ane arose at her bed-fit,
> An a grumly guest I'm sure was he:
> "Here am I, thy bairn's father,
> Although I be not comelie.
>
> I am a man upon the land,
> I am a selchie in the sea
> And when I'm far frae ev'ry strand
> My dwelling is in Sule Skerry."

A warning tale, Mairi thought. A boogeyman story to keep foolish girls safe at home. She smiled. She was a Londoner, after all, not a silly Scots maid.

And then she heard a strange sound, almost like an echo of the music of Cook's song, from the backside of the rocks. At first she thought it was the sound of wind against water, the sound she heard continuously at Gran's home where every room rustled with the music of the sea. But this was different somehow, a sweet, low throbbing, part moan and part chant. Without knowing the why of it, only feeling a longing brought on by the wordless song, and excusing it as solving a mystery, she went looking for the source of the song. The rockface was smooth on this side, dry, without the slippery, somber lichen; and the water was calmer so it did not splash up spray. Mairi continued down the side, the tune reeling her in effortlessly.

Near the waterline was a cave opening into the west face of the rock, a man-sized opening as black and uninviting as a collier's pit. But she took a deep, quick breath, and went in.

Much to her surprise, the inside of the cave glowed with an incandescent blue-green light that seemed to come

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from the cave walls themselves. Darker pockets of light illuminated the concave sections of the wall. Pieces of seaweed caught in these niches gave the appearance of household gods.

Mairi could scarcely breathe. Any loud sound seemed sacrilegious. Her breath itself was a violation.

And then she heard the moan-song again, so loud that it seemed to fill the entire cave. It swelled upward like a wave, then broke off in a bubbling sigh.

Mairi walked slowly in, not daring to touch the cave walls in case she should mar the perfection of the color, yet fearing that she might fall for the floor of the cave was littered with puddles of water. Slowly, one foot in front of another, she explored the cave. In the blue-green light, her sweater and skin seemed to take on an underwater tinge as if she had been transformed into a mermaid.

And then the cave ended, tapering off to a rounded apse with a kind of stone altar the height of a bed. There was something dark lying on the rock slab. Fearfully, Mairi inched towards it and when she got close, the dark thing heaved up slightly and spoke to her in a strange guttural tongue. At first Mairi thought it was a seal, a wounded seal, but then she saw it was a man huddled under a sealskin coat. He suddenly lay back, feverish and shuddering, old blood beading his head like a crown.

Without thinking, Mairi moved closer and put her hand on his forehead expecting it to burn with temperature, but he was cold and damp and slippery to the touch. Then he opened his eyes and they were the same blue-green color as the walls, as the underside of a wave. She wondered for a moment if he were blind, for there seemed to be no pupil in those eyes. Then he closed the lids and smiled at her, whispering in that same unknown tongue.

"Never mind, never mind, I'll get help," whispered Mairi. He might be a fisherman from the town or an RAF man shot down on a mission. She looked at his closed-down face. Here, at last, was her way to aid the war effort. "Lie still. First I'll see to your wounds. They taught us first aid at school."

She examined his forehead under the slate-grey hair, but whatever wound had been there was now closed and seamed with scabs. And when she started to slip the sealskin coat down to examine him for other wounds, she was shocked to discover he had no clothes on under it. No clothes at all.

She hesitated then. Except for the statues in the museum she had never seen a man naked. Not even in the first aid books. But what if he were *hurt unto death.* The fearsome poetry of the old phrase decided her. She inched back the sealskin covering as gently as she could.

He did not move except for the rise and fall of his chest. His body was cov-

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ered with fine hairs, grey as the hair on his head. He had broad, powerful shoulders and slim, tapering hips. The skin on his hands was strangely wrinkled as if he had been underwater too long. She realized with a start that he was quite, quite beautiful — but alien. As her grandmother often said, "Men are queer creatures, so different from us, child. And someday you will know it."

Then his eyes opened again and she could not look away from them. He smiled, opened his mouth, and began to speak, to chant really. Mairi bent down over him and he opened his arms to her, the grey webbing between his fingers pulsing strongly. And without willing it, she covered his mouth with hers. All the sea was in that kiss, cold and vast, and perilous. It drew her in till she thought she would faint with it, with his tongue darting around hers as quick as a minnow. And then his arms encircled her and he was as strong as the tide.

She felt only the briefest of pain, and drowning in her love for him, she let the land go.

When Mairi awoke, she was siting on the stone floor and cold, bone-chilling cold. She shivered and pushed her hand across her cheeks. They were wet, though whether with tears or from the damp air she could not say.

Above her, on the stone bed, the wounded man breathed raggedly. Occasionally he let out a moan. Mairi stood and looked down at him. His flesh was pale, wan, almost translucent. She put her hand on his shoulder but he did not move. She wondered if she had fallen and hit her head, if she had dreamed what had happened.

"Help. I must get help for him," she thought. She covered him again with the coat and made her way back to the cave mouth. Her entire body ached and she decided she must have fallen and blacked out.

The threatening storm had not yet struck, but the dark slant of rain against the horizon was closer still. Mairi scrambled along the rocks to where the coracle waited. She put on her mac, then heaved the boat over and into the water and slipped in, getting only her boots wet.

It was more difficult rowing back, rowing against the tide. Waves broke over the bow of the little boat, and by the time she was within sight of the town, she was soaked to the skin. The stones of Sule Skerry were little more than grey wave tops then, and with one pull on the oar, they disappeared from sight. The port enfolded her, drew her in. She felt safe and lonely at once.

When Mairi reached the shore there was a knot of fishermen drawing in their boats. A few were still at work on the bright orange nets, folding them carefully in that quick, intricate pattern that only they seemed to know.

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One man, in a blue watch cap, held up a large piece of tattered white cloth, an awning of silk. It seemed to draw the other men to him. He gestured with the silk and it billowed out as if capturing the coming storm.

Suddenly Mairi was horribly afraid. She broke into the circle of men. "Oh please, please," she cried out, hearing the growing wail of wind in her voice. "There's a man on the rocks. He's hurt."

"The rocks?" The man with the silk stuffed it into his pocket, but a large fold of it hung down his side. "Which rocks."

"Out there. Beyond the sight-line. Where the seals stay," Mairi said.

"Whose child is she?" asked a man who still carried an orange net. He spoke as if she were too young to understand him, or were a foreigner.

"Old Mrs. Goodleigh's grandchild. The one with the English father," came an answer.

"Mavis' daughter, the one who became a nurse in London."

"Too good for Caith, then?"

Mairi was swirled about in their conversation.

"Please," she tried again.

"Suppose'n she means The Rocks?"

"Yes," begged Mairi. "The rocks out there. Sule Skerry."

"Hush, child. Must na say the name in sight of the sea," said the blue cap man.

"Toss it a coin, Jock," said the white silk man.

The man called Jock reached into his pocket and flung a coin out to the ocean. It skipped across the waves twice, then sank.

"That should quieten. Now then, The Rocks you say?"

Mairi turned to the questioner. He had a face like a map, wrinkles marking the boundries of nose and cheek. "Yes, sir," she said breathily.

"Aye, he might have fetched up there," said the white silk man, drawing it out of his pocket again for the others to see.

Did they know him, then, Mairi wondered.

"Should we leave him to the storm?" asked Jock.

"He might be one of ours," the map-faced man said.

They all nodded at that.

"He's sheltered." Mairi spoke suddenly. "In a cave. A grotto, like. It's all cast over with a blue and green light."

"Teched, she is. There's no grotto there," said blue cap.

"No blue and green light either," said the map-faced man, turning from her and speaking earnestly with his companions. "Even if he's one of them, he might tell us what we need. Our boys could use the knowledge. From that bit of silk, it's hard to say which side he's on." He reached out and touched the white cloth with a gnarled finger.

"Aye, we'd best look for him."

"He won't be hard to find," Mairi said. "He's sick. Hurt, I touched him."

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"What was he wearing then?" asked blue cap.

The wind had picked up and Mairi couldn't hear the question. "What?" she shouted.

"Wearing. What was the fellow wearing?"

Suddenly remembering that the man had been naked under the coat, she was silent.

"She doesn't know. Probably too scared to go close. Come on," said Jock.

The men pushed past her and dragged along two of the large six-men boats that fished the haaf banks. The waves were slapping angrily at the shore, gobbling up pieces of the sand and churning out pebbles at each retreat. Twelve men scrambled into the boats and headed out to sea, their oars flashing together.

Three men were left on shore, including the one holding the white silk. They stood staring out over the cold waters, their eyes squinted almost shut against the strange bright light that was running before the storm.

Mairi stood near them, but apart.

No one spoke.

It was a long half hour before the first of the boats leapt back towards them, across a wave, just seconds ahead of the rain.

The second boat beached just as the storm broke, the men jumping out onto the sand and drawing the boat up behind them. A dark form was huddled against the stern.

Mairi tried to push through to get a close glimpse of the man, but blue cap spoke softly to her.

"Nay, nay girl, don't look. He's not what you would call a pretty sight. He pulled a gun on Jock and Jock took a rock to him."

But Mairi had seen enough. The man was dressed in a flier's suit, and a leather jacket with zippers. His blonde hair was matted with blood.

"That's not the one I saw," she murmured. "Not the one I...."

"Found him lying on the rocks, just as the girl said. Down by the west side of the rocks," said Jock. "We threw his coins to the sea and bought our way home. Though I don't know that German coins buy much around here. Bloody Huns."

"What's a German flier doing this far west, I'd like to know," said mapface.

"Maybe he was trying for America," Jock answered, laughing sourly.

"Ask him. When he's fit to talk," said blue cap.

The man with the white silk wrapped it around the German's neck. The parachute shroud lines hung down the man's back. Head down, the German was marched between Jock and blue cap up the strand and onto the Main Street. The other men trailed behind.

With the rain soaking through her cap and running down her cheeks, Mairi took a step towards them. Then

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she turned away. She kicked slowly along the water's edge til she found the stone steps that led up to her Gran's house. The sea pounded a steady reminder on her left, a bass continuo to the song that ran around in her head. The last three verses came to her slowly.

Now he has ta'en a purse of goud
And he has put it upon her knee
Sayin' "Gie to me my little young son
An tak ye up thy nourrice-fee."

She had already started to put her hands in her pockets to keep them warm. It did not surprise her to find a coin in one of the mac's deep pockets. Reluctantly she drew it out. It was green and gold, slightly crusted, as if it had lain on the ocean bottom for some time. She had never seen it before and could only guess how it had gotten into her coat. She closed her hand around the coin, so tightly a second coin was imprinted on her palm.

An it shall pass on a summer's day
when the sun shines het on every stane
That I will take my little young son
An teach him for to swim his lane.

An thu sall marry a proud gunner
An a right-proud gunner I'm sure he'll be.
An the very first shot that ere he shoots
He'll kill baith my young son and me."

If it were true, and not some dream brought on by a fall (she felt again those cold, compelling hands on her, the movement of the webbings pulsing on her breasts, the briney smell of his breath) then Harry Stones would have to marry her after all. Her father could not deny them that.

Only what would the doctor say, she wondered. "A fine little boy, Mrs. Stones. Only one problem, I'm afraid, he's covered all over with grey hair and he looks rather like a seal."

And laughing and crying at the same time, Mairi began to run up the stone steps. The sound of the sea followed her all the way home, part melody and part unending moan.

NOTICE TO ALL READERS

Beginning with the October 1982 issue, the single copy price of F&SF will increase to $1.75. The new one-year subscription rate will be $17.50. We have held the current price for more than two years, but this is no longer possible in the face of increasing costs. There is still time to subscribe at the old rates; see the coupon on page 118.

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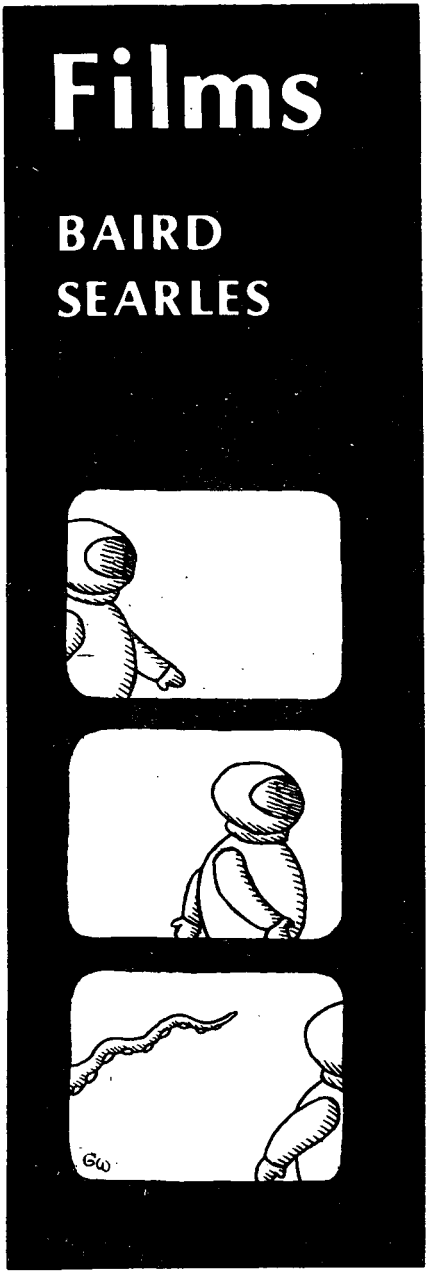
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

FLICK NEEDS BIC

Despite the facetious heading for this piece, *Quest For Fire* should be taken seriously; any resemblance to the boobs-and-bronto epics of the past is purely superficial. (For the record, let me note that *One Million Years B.C.* is my favorite bad movie.)

But it also raises a lot of problems, the first of which is that I don't really think that I should even be reviewing it here. To explain that, a brief precis for those who haven't seen it is in order:

Quest For Fire concerns a tribe of primitive humans of 80 thousand years ago, hunters whose major cultural asset seems to be the use of fire. An attack on their cave by a more primitive type leads to their flight to an extremely uncomfortable, marshy island, and, worse, the loss of their fire, which they have no idea how to rekindle.

Three of the males embark on an epic trek to find fire. They finally succeed in stealing it from a cannibal tribe, at the same time liberating a female captive for whom the leader of the three, Naoh, conceives an elementary sort of attachment (very elementary). She is from a higher culture group, with whom they have a brief sojourn before returning, with the fire, to their own people.

In the hullabaloo of their reception, the fire is lost in the water, but Naoh has learned to make fire from his mate's people. Triumphant friction saves the day.

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The stone age saga has long been associated with science fiction; in most cases, I fail to see why. Certainly a good deal of speculation based on what is known scientifically is involved, but that's true of any historical fiction dealing with a remote period. So far as I'm concerned, prehistoric fiction is historical fiction.

There are exceptions. Of the several recent novels in that area, Björn Kurtén's *The Dance of the Tiger* speculates so radically, particularly about the culture of Neandertal man, that I think it does qualify as s/f. And the aforementioned b&b movies are out and out fantasies.

But *Quest For Fire* seems determined to stick to the facts so far as they are known. (There's so much *not* known that there are inevitably questionable matters involved; this will equally inevitably lead the scientifically disputatious to natter about its accuracy.) Therefore I consider it historical fiction and why am I reviewing it here?

Because the film's entire ad campaign has touted it widely as "science fantasy," and even dared raise the sacred name of *2001* as a comparative work. This is patently misleading, as well as being unfair to the movie itself, since its makers have so scrupulously attempted a realistic portrayal of that period.

Besides, *Quest For Fire* is a good deal more interesting to talk about than the latest geek movie; if I must be given blood, gore and primitive behavior, let it be where it belongs, in the Pleistocene.

(In point of fact, the violence in QFF is certainly there, but used with remarkable restraint.)

So now that we've established what the film in question is not, what is it? It's awe-inspiringly well done, that's what it is. For any historical film, I use the time trip test: does my eye think it's seeing costumed actors, or do I really believe a camera has been smuggled back in time? I can think of no film where the latter theory has been so much the case.

Obviously, there is no witty dialogue (no comprehensible dialogue at all, in fact), no great psychological insights, no subtlety. The plot proceeds by incident; the interest is sustained by the novelty of what you're being shown, the suspense of the quest, and that curious intellectual satisfaction of "Of course, that's what it must have been like," a feeling I have no more specific term for, but which is rare and wonderful when it happens.

There are moments of great beauty — the tiny isolated figures against the unending empty landscapes of enormous variety — and moments of high drama. For me, the transcendent point of the film was the encounter of our small band with a herd of mammoth. The scene, vibrant with imminent danger, is dominated by closeups of the infinitely wary, infinitely wise pachydermal eye of the herd leader. The resolution of the scene, the acceptance of

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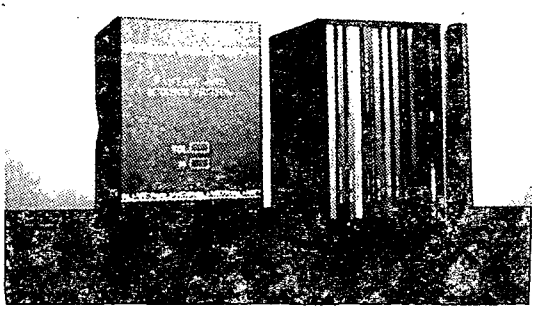
each species by the other, left me limp.

I am in awe of the actors. If the art of acting consists of creating the illusion of that which you are not, the principal four in *Quest For Fire* — Everett McGill, Ron Perlman, Nameer el-Kadi, and Rae Dawn Chong — have turned in the performances of the century. Mouthing the created languages of Anthony Burgess and using the body language and gestures directed by Desmond Morris, coated in mud in the case of the woman and with make-up devices for the men that completely change the shape of the face, these actors deserve every award going this year, and how much do you want to bet that they'll be totally ignored?

I *do* have some reservations about the film. The score is one of those overwhelming choral affairs à la Scriabin that is simply inapropos. There are, on one hand, perhaps too many moments that are cute or sentimental: the discovery of laughter (along with the discovery of slapstick humor); the comic treeing of the three men by lions; a final shot of the lead couple (she pregnant) gazing at the full moon. And on the other, perhaps a little too much dwelling on the rawness of the period, less the violence, as I noted, than the animalistic sex, the repetitiveness of which comes close to exploitation. Realism, yes, but past a certain degree one wonders if they're not aiming at an audience of the level of those depicted on screen.

And I can't help noting that if instead of a time-travelling camera, they'd had a time-travelling disposable lighter, the whole thing would have been obviated.



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This tale about a most unusual shore leave in Manhattan is Gary Jennings' first story here since "The Relic," June 1979. Mr. Jennings' most recent book is the best-selling historical novel AZTEC.

Die and Follow Me

BY

GARY JENNINGS

Tread softly here...
As you are now, so once was I;
As I am now, so you will be;
Prepare to die and follow me.

— New England epitaph

The long, black-hulled vessel slid silently through the shrouded waters, disdaining to sound its foghorns. The First Mate stared out through the windows of the bridge, waiting to see the skyline of their next port loom up at any moment out of the mist.

It did not, yet. He turned with a sigh and went aft to his cabin. He returned to find the Captain on the bridge, and handed him a sealed envelope.

"The Orders, sir," he said, and gestured toward the many-dialed chronometer on the bulkhead. "Time to open them."

The Captain grunted, ripped open the envelope and glanced rapidly at its contents. "Have Stoker Conway report," he muttered. The First Mate nodded and stepped to the speaking tube.

Below, the Chief Engineer said, "Aye aye, sir," into his end of the tube and then clambered down a companion ladder into the red glare of the fireboxes. He picked his way gingerly along the iron plates of the decking, slippery with spilled grease and littered with ankle-turning lumps of coal. He halted at No. 4 Box. where a grimed and sweating man repeatedly plunged his red-hot shovel into the coal bunker, then into the seething maw of the furnace.

The stoker winced when the Engineer slapped the raw flesh of his

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shoulder. "Conway!" the officer bawled, over the roar of the fire. "To the bridge!"

It was the first time Conway had been topside since he had joined the crew. It was as well that the fog pressed so closely; he could not have borne to see the world revealed all at once. Even the prosaic fittings of the ship's upper decks were things of novelty and beauty. He had to struggle to remember their names — masts and funnels and stacks — but he dimly recognized their long-forgotten shapes, and loved them.

As he staggered along the gently rocking deck, he touched with reverence the railings, the ropes, the hatch covers. Everything was so cool he could touch it without recoiling. The damp caress of the fog was like balm on his burning body. Slowly, his hands began to uncurl from the knotted clench that the scorching iron shovel had cooked them into.

His voice creaked from long disuse when he said, at the entry to the bridge, "Stoker Conway reporting, sir." When he whipped off his cap it peeled a strip of dead, crinkly skin from his forehead.

The Captain beckoned him in, then stood staring at him for a silent few seconds. He seemed to derive a grim satisfction from regarding the man — burned hairless of locks, brows and lashes; his body a suppurating flayed thing of blisters broken and festered; the few remaining scraps of skin crisp and black like overdone pork.

"Conway, Simon W.," said the Captain. "Do you know what day this is?"

"No, sir," said the stoker, with a pathetic smile that suddenly brightened. "Is it—?"

The Captain pointed through the forward windows. The fog shredded away and they saw the high, proud skyline of the city.

The Captain said, "It's time for your shore leave."

"But—" Stoker Conway was staring in bewilderment at the skyscrapers. "But it hasn't changed at all!"

"What were you expecting?" asked the First Mate.

"I — I really don't know. Rocketships, maybe. Strange new kinds of buildings. Or maybe nothing at all, after all this time. But it's just the same as it was when—"

The Captain motioned toward the chronometer. Conway looked up at it and read the date: May 22, 1981. The ragged fissures between the crusts of his face were all that showed that he turned pale.

"How can it be?" he said, almost to himself. "At first, I used to kick aside a lump of coal each day. When they got to be too many, I used a lump for each week — then for each month. Then I gave up. There was never enough coal in the whole bunker to count the time. But now...."

The Captain silenced him with an impatient cough. He rustled the papers

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in his hand and said, "We dock in an hour. You'll go ashore at dawn."

"Go ashore like this, Captain?" the stoker said miserably, running his ruined hands down his ruined body. "They wouldn't let me land."

"You'll be fixed up. Clothes and money will be provided. You will be the Simon Conway of before. But, in case you don't remember the conditions, we weigh anchor the following dawn. You are to be back at your furnace then."

The ravaged face turned again to the view of the city. "I wonder if I want to go...."

The Captain shrugged. "It says here — you loved her."

Conway hung his head. "I can't remember what she looked like, Captain," he confessed. "I loved that city too, but now I couldn't tell you the name of a single landmark. She won't remember me, either."

The Captain glanced at his papers. "Her name, Claire Farris. Her description—"

"Oh, I memorized that," the stoker said wearily. "I recited over and over to myself, 'Dark brown hair, shoulder length, with a curl under at the ends. Hazel eyes. A tiny mole high up on her left cheek...' All of it, so many million times. But that's not a memory. It's—"

"Belay it!" the First Mate said sharply. "Lay below and prepare for shore leave."

As the stoker stepped out over the sill, the Captain said to him, almost in sympathy, "Don't forget, Conway. I was commanding this ship a long, long time before you joined the roster. And I've *never* been ashore — not even for one precious day."

The tall, sandy-haired man who came down the gangplank at dawn walked a trifle unsteadily and leaned on the guardrail. For so long he had been accustomed to the cramped walkways of the engine room and the slow roll of the ship that to step out freely and find firm footing was a slightly dizzying experience.

He passed through the empty, echoing pier buildings and found himself on a wide, cobbled avenue, an elevated highway overhead. The streets were still in shadow; the newly risen sun did not yet penetrate to this western side of the city. There were no people or moving vehicles to be seen, but directly across the avenue glowed the friendly windows of an all-night diner.

Simon Conway had spent the hours before dawn in the officers' wardroom of the ship, devouring all the books, magazines and newspapers he could find. They had almost made him feel a part of the world again. He had reacquainted himself, to some degree, with the everyday doings and living habits of the people he was venturing among. He thought he would be able to communicate and to find his way about with a semblace of assurance. The

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diner would be a good place to try his land legs.

He was the only customer in the place. He ordered coffee, and the counterman did not remark on any unfamiliar accent or any awkward phrasing in the brief request. Simon sipped the strong brew and stared raptly as the counterman dealt with all the trivialities of his job — scraping the griddle, washing glasses, replenishing a tray of butter pats. To Simon Conway, the man's mundane labors were a delight to behold; he would have given anything to be that man.

"Can you tell me," Simon asked him, "what today is?"

"Sa'rday," the man grunted.

"The date, I mean."

"Twenny-second."

"That's, er, what I thought," said Simon, and then, in some embarrassment, "but — the *whole* date? I've been at sea for quite some time and...."

"It is *Sat*-turday, *nine*-teen hundred and eighty-one. And this is the Waterway Diner, in the borough of Manhattan, city of New York, U. S. A."

"Then it's true," Simon said to himself. "All that time to have passed. And still it's just...."

"You finished witcher coffee?"

"Er, yes, thanks," Simon mumbled and got up off the stool.

"That'll be two bits," said the man.

"Oh, yes." Simon hauled a handful of coins out of his pocket and wondered, in confusion, which coins were bits.

"A quarter," the man persisted harshly. Simon hastily handed him a piece that proclaimed itself "Quarter Dollar," and headed for the door.

He walked slowly uptown, savoring the morning air and the newly built look of the high buildings just emerging into sunlight. Somewhere in this city she was walking, too. Somewhere they would meet, and he thought he knew where. But it was far away. Simon was not only unfamiliar with transportation facilities; he was loath to waste his rationed time in messing with schedules, fretting in waiting rooms and, quite possibly, getting lost.

He looked into the wallet in his breast pocket and found it gratifyingly full. More money than he could conceivably spend in a day — in a month, even. The Captain obviously had his own ideas of what a shore leave should be. At just that moment, an empty taxicab turned the corner into the avenue. It slowed and stopped as Simon crossed the pavement.

"Do you know," he began uncertainly, "where the Calvary Cemetery is — in Mount Vernon?"

Had he remembered more about the temperament and insularity of Manhattan cabdrivers, he might have hesitated to propose a trip of some thirty miles. But it was early in the morning, the cabbie was an owner-driver and in a benign humor.

"Guess I can find it," he said, and then, as Simon climbed in: "If you're comin' back to town, I can give you a

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trip rate. Save you some jack."

They settled on a price for the round trip, Simon managed to count out the money without mistake, and the cab swung up a ramp onto the elevated highway.

"Goin' a funeral?" the driver asked.

"No," Simon said absently. "Just to visit a grave."

"Oh." Then, in hushed tones: "Someone dear t'ya, huh?"

"My family's plot," said Simon. "I haven't been there in — that is, I've been at sea for a long time."

"Yeah, it's right y' should remember 'em once in a while. I go see *my* folks' restin' places too, when I can. But not t'grieve, I want y' unnerstand. Way I figure, they're a lot better off'n I am. They're at rest, y' get me? No worries, no bills, no goddamn traffic hassles. That's how I look at it."

Simon murmured noncommittally.

"It's rough. Life, I mean," the philosopher went on. "Better out of it, like my folks and yours. Bleemie, there's days I wish the Commies'd go ahead and *drop* the bomb on us. Put us all up there with th' Holy Mudder." He crossed himself.

Traffic was sparse and driving was easy; they made Mount Vernon in less than an hour. The driver made one or two inquiries and found the cemetery without undue delay. He shut off the engine and settled down to wait. Simon went through the high scrollwork gates and up the neat, flower-bordered driveway.

The cemetery was a model of upper-class reverence and decorum. At first glance, it was a rolling parkland of barbered lawns, tailored trees, geometric flower beds and gracefully curving white gravel paths. Only by looking closely could one see the discreet marble markers set flush with the grass. Here and there, gray-uniformed caretakers were already at work with garden tools. An occasional visitor wandered along a path, carrying a nosegay and searchingly inspecting each grave.

Simon strode purposefully through the green acres, not pausing to admire the scenic vistas that presented themselves at every turning. Before long, he stood beside the grave he sought, gazing down at it with mixed emotions.

The grave had been dug — and filled — only yesterday. Its mound was an obtrusion in the level lawn; the carefully fitted new sods that covered it were not yet rooted and looked a little parched. Under a grouping of yesterday's floral offerings, the marble plaque displayed a curt inscription:

SIMON WARING CONWAY
SEP 20 1949 — MAY 17 1981

After a moment, Simon Waring Conway raised his eyes. A hundred yards away, on the crest of a little hill, a group of black-garbed figures stood stark against the morning sky. As he watched, the sunlight glinted on the silver fittings of a dark casket, and it began slowly to descend on its cables into the waiting ground.

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They will pray over it, thought Simon. Consign it to everlasting rest and then tenderly cover it with four cubic yards of earth, as if they are protecting it from instrusion. If they only knew that every grave has its false bottom, like a stage magician's escape hatch. If one of those pallbearers could watch — as the grave's bottom drops away and the casket is lowered still farther, much farther, immeasurably farther — that watcher would never dare to die.

He was there again, in memory, in that nightmare courtroom, looking down at himself in the coffin that had been lowered from somewhere far above. The Simon Conway in the coffin was imperturbably at rest; the Simon Conway in the prisoner's dock was tense with terror.

"You admit, then," echoed the prosecutor's hollow voice, "that this is the man you shot?"

"Yes! Yes!" Simon shouted. "Why must this farce go on?"

His voice, too, reverberated in the chamber. The walls seemed to be hewn from solid granite; pierced, entwined and festooned with the barrel-thick roots of what must have been some giant vegetation growing above. The walls soared upward to meet a roof invisible in darkness. From the impossibly high magisterial bench, the unseen judge's voice boomed down, "All will be conducted according to the Law," and Conway was silent.

The trial dragged on without intermission. The prosecution proved — unnecessarily, Simon thought — that the man in the coffin was dead. A bailiff peeled away the mortician's cosmetic wax to expose the shattered temple. Simon despairingly identified the killing pistol as his own. The defense attorney offered only one mitigating circumstance:

"It was a pact, Your Honor," he told the bench. "Premeditated and executed with the full knowledge and cooperation of his co-defendant, presently on trial in Women's Court."

Simon saw and heard the proceedings through a fog of disbelief. Could it be that the suicide bullet had somehow failed to kill him? Was he suffering the delirium of a serious brain injury, and no more? But then the jury filed out, filed in. And when the foreman spoke — "Guilty as charged..." — Simon knew that this was something worse than just the hallucination of a disordered brain.

"You have heard the verdict," came the rumble of the unseen judge. "Has the prisoner anything to say before sentence is pronounced?"

"Your Honor!" Simon shouted upward, his voice thin even in reverberation. "It was done for love! We wanted to be together, wherever we went afterward — even here. Please, why isn't she here with me?"

A murmur rustled through the shadowly ranks of faceless spectators, but no one answered his question.

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"It is the judgement of this court and of that court likewise trying this case in separate session," boomed the voice from above, "that the two defendants receive coincident sentences. The jury has found you guilty, Simon Conway, but has recommended mercy. Now, therefore, it is the sentence of this court that, on this the day of your burial, the twenty-first of May in the year 1981, as it is counted by your mortal fellows, you be formally delivered over to the proper authorities and be put to hard labor, to cruel and unusual punishments ... for that term of indefinite duration manifest in the word Eternity."

Simon reeled and grabbed at the railing of the dock to keep from falling.

"With this single proviso and sole remission," the voice rolled on. "In consideration of the jury's recommendation, both prisoners shall be released from confinement at the conclusion of one thousand years' punishment..."

A meager hope flickered through Simon's consciousness, but was instantly dashed.

"...for the interval of one Earth day, from sunrise to sunrise, during which their freedom shall not be restricted nor their right to reunion challenged. At the expiration of that interval, both prisoners to be remanded to their separate confinements and punishments, for the remainder of Eternity."

The gavel dropped, and the sound was a roil of thunder counterpointing the last awful words:

"This sentence to be carried out forthwith, and subject to no review or appeal, now or forever. So be it."

Simon came back to the present with a start, suddenly aware that he was looking into the eyes of a girl who stood directly opposite him on the other side of the grave. For a moment he resented the stranger's intrusion on his reverie. But then he found himself reciting, in a voice of quiet wonder:

"Dark brown hair, shoulder length, with a curl under at the ends. Hazel eyes. A tiny mole..."

She interrupted, with a reminiscent smile and a recitation of her own:

"Tousled hair, shaggy eyebrows, lots of freckles..."

"You're Claire," he breathed.

"I hoped you'd come here, Simon," she said.

He stepped around the mound and took her hands in his. There was the shyness of strangers between them; he could not bring himself to embrace her, and she made no move at all.

"Yes," he said softly, his eyes fixed on her face. "Yes, I remember now. I remember you, Claire."

Pain darkened her eyes, and her voice came from a thousand years ago. "I don't look like this, Simon — not any more."

He shook his head in violent negation of the horror behind her words. "Claire, where did you come from?"

"Up there," she said. "They're burying me today."

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Simon glanced up the hill, to the funeral he had earlier been watching. The grave was covered, the service over. The few mourners were drifting out of sight toward the cortege beyond the knoll.

"I stayed on the fringe," said Claire, "and kept this scarf over my face. No one noticed me."

"What I really meant was, where — where have you been?"

"Oh," she said, and turned away. Simon followed her and took her hand again. "It's an enormous steam laundry — with live steam that scalds and corrodes." There was no emotion in her voice.

He stopped her and turned her to face him. With grave concern he said, "There's one thing I've got to know. Claire, did I hurt you — when I—?"

Involuntarily, she touched her free hand to her temple. "No," she said, after a moment's thought. "No. I remember: you kissed me. And then there was — nothing — until I found myself in a courtroom like an underground cavern." Abruptly changing the subject, she said, with an attempt at lightness, "It's a beautiful day they've given us."

"Yes. What shall we do with it?"

"There's so much I've missed and longed for," she said. "We couldn't possibly do it all. And yet ... every single little thing seems so much, so wonderful, after all this time. I could just stand and look at these flowers the whole day."

"I really don't know what's expected of us," Simon said thoughtfully. "Perhaps there are things we *ought* to do."

"Do you mean like — going to see *her*?"

"God, no!" he said, more loudly than he'd intended. Then he added, as if the prospect were not unattractive, "The shock would probably kill her."

"Anyway," Claire said, "I imagine they've arranged to prevent any encounters like that."

"Look," said Simon, forcing enthusiasm. "Let's think of one of the best times we've ever had, and do it all over again."

"It's so hard to remember," she murmured, frowning. Then she brightened. "But last Sunday was nice."

"Last—? Oh. Yes."

"It was the nicest day I ever spent. Because we were together. Because we both knew it was the last, and we made it the very best day of our lives." She looked up at him. "Oh, Simon, I wish I could cry."

"For all we've lost?" he asked huskily.

"No, no, darling. For all we had."

She reached up, drew his head down to hers, and kissed him for a long time. He had forgotten what it was like.

At last he said, "I have a cab waiting at the gate." He grinned. "Let's go back to New York and do the town!"

She smiled, linked her arm in his, and they hurried down to the street.

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There they found another couple, a young man and woman, standing by the car, obviously in altercation with the driver. As they approached, the young man left the group and came up to Simon.

"I say, I tried to hire that New York cab, and he said he was waiting for you. I wonder, if you're going back to the city, could you possibly squeeze us in with you?"

Simon and Claire exchanged a quick visual communication, and he said, "I'm sure we can."

"Oh, swell! Can't thank you enough."

The party climbed into the taxi, the young man and woman taking the jumpseats, and the driver headed again for the parkway.

"We came out in one of the procession's limousines," the young man explained. "But now that it's all over, we wanted to get away from the long faces and the post-mortems. Oh, by the way, I'm Richard Hodges and this is Felice Stirling. Heck — Felice and Rick."

"Okay," said Simon genially. "Claire and Simon."

"Angelo," said the driver, with a wink in the mirror, and they all laughed with him.

"You came out with a funeral party?" said Claire.

"Yes, but it wasn't anyone very close," said Rick. "A cousin of my uncle's — whatever that would make her to me."

"You didn't seem very broken up," said Simon.

"Oh, it was a sad-enough event," Rick said. "Just a young woman. A lovely one, too. The tragedy is that she was shot."

Simon Conway and Claire Farris stiffened slightly. "What," she asked breathlessly, "is your uncle's name?"

"Farris, Sylvester Farris," he said. "Seems my cousin, if that's what she was, was in love with a married man. His wife wouldn't give him a divorce and — well, I don't know all the details, but I gather the wife had all the charm of World War Two. A genuine bitch, and a vindictive one. Anyway, last Sunday night, the man shot my cousin and then himself. They both left notes. It was a suicide pact."

"Do stop, Rick," said Felice, laying a hand on his arm and drawing his attention to the pallor of Claire's face.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I should have realized — you must have someone of your own out there at Calvary."

"It's all right," Claire said faintly.

"Well, hang it all," Rick insisted stubbornly, addressing Felice. "I still say, if I'd been the guy, I'd have shot the *wife*."

The ride to New York was evidently overfamiliar and boring to Rick and Felice. They carried on a desultory conversation of their own, while Simon and Claire silently held hands and gazed with solemn fascination at the passing scenery. To them, even the most dreary and monotonous stretches

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of highway were beautiful. And when they sighted the soaring lacework of the George Washington Bridge, with the spires of the city rising beyond, their hearts leapt.

All four of them debarked in midtown, at Fifth Avenue and the park, and Rick got out his wallet. Simon waved it away. "It was paid for in advance."

"At least let me get the tip, then."

Angelo pocketed a generous wad, wished them all a "happy Sa'rday," and drove away.

The two couples exchanged farewells on the curb, but before they parted, Rick said to Claire, with a quizzical frown, "You know, I could swear I've seen you somewhere before, Miss..."

She parried it. "And I hope we'll see you again, Rick, Felice. Goodbye."

As they walked away, Simon said to Claire, "Had he?"

She nodded. "In the coffin."

They crossed the avenue and strolled into the park. The morning was well along by now, and the paths and lawns were alive with sunbathers, sweethearts, joggers, skaters, gamboling children, mothers and nurses pushing perambulators.

"We used to walk here, I remember," said Simon. "The zoo is up this way."

To anyone who noticed them, they were just two more springtime sweethearts — perhaps handsomer than the average — idling away a sunny May morning. They ate Crackerjack, and Simon bought her a yellow balloon. They watched the clowning of the sealions, admired the sleek grace of the jungle cats, grinned at the pompous chest-thumping of the gorilla, and cooed at the preposterously outsized baby hippo.

They left the park by the zoo stairs and were back on Fifth Avenue. Claire set free her balloon and they watched it reach for heaven until they lost it in the blue. They turned southward again and followed the avenue down to the neighborhood of the expensive shops and department stores. Claire seemed almost magically vivified by the display windows. She would exclaim things like: "Ah, that handbag was there last time I passed! I remember thinking how well it would go with my...."

Simon smiled inwardly, loving her for her unquenchable high spirits even on such a stolen day as this, and reflecting with humorous wonder on the emergence of the eternal Eve.

But at times a shadow would cross Claire's face. For both of them looked with poignant envy at the cheerful, smiling, jaunty people who passed — and with not much less envy at the faces creased by worried frowns.

"Isn't it a pity," said Claire, "that we can't tell them all how trivial and meaningless their troubles are?"

"Could anyone have told us?" Simon replied.

The exultant bells of St. Thomas's

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suddenly pealed from the somnolent sky, ringing out high noon. Claire turned impulsively to Simon.

"Do you know something?" she said, with a little laugh. "I'm hungry. For the first time in a thousand years!"

An elderly gentleman passerby turned to look at her, and smiled indulgently at what he doubtless took for hyperbole.

"How about lunch at Guido's?" said Simon. "But we were there, weren't we? Just — last Sunday."

"Let's go anyway. I do want to see the Village again."

Guido's was one of their "discoveries" — an undistinguished Bleecker Street hole-in-the-wall presided over by a grossly fat and sloppy Sicilian who was the best cook in Manhattan.

"Ha!" he roared at them. "You come twice inna one week, I *know* you like Guido's cooking!"

"Oh, I dunno," said Simon, with a mock grimace. "Got anything worth eating today?"

"Oho! Gotta somet'ing special. Serve-a just for you." Guido peered conspiratorially around the room, then spoke in a hoarse whisper. "It'sa larks. My nephew bring 'em to me inna secret. No s'pose to catch and sell. But for you..."

"Larks?" said Simon.

"*Sì*. Inna my special sauce. You pick 'em up by a head, *so*, bite 'em off, *so*, chew up. Li'l tender bones and everyt'ing." He kissed his fingertips. *Meraviglioso!*"

Claire shook her head. "No larks, please, Guido." He looked astonished. "They sing," she said meekly.

"Sing!" he bellowed. "No sing when you eat 'em!"

"That's what I mean."

They settled on antipasto, scampi and Borsalino, and Guido went away with gestures eloquent of bafflement.

As she picked delicately among the antipasto, Claire mused, "To him, we're exactly the same people who were here last Sunday. I think we had scampi then, too."

Simon managed a smile. "Uh-huh. Just two heedless, happy-go-lucky Manhattanites out on the town."

"If anyone had mentioned ghosts to us, back then, we'd have thought of Topper."

"I wonder what Guido would do if he knew his restaurant was haunted."

"Call in a bishop to exorcise us, I expect."

Simon poured them each a water glass full of Borsalino and said, "I wonder if it would help to get blind drunk before we go back."

"Go to hell with a hangover?" exclaimed Claire, with a nervous laugh. "You're a g-glutton for p-punish—" The brittle laughter shattered like heartbreak into an uncontrollable spasm of weeping. She clutched her napkin to her mouth to stifle the sobs; her body was racked by convulsive shudders. Simon gripped hard at her trembling hand until she caught hold of herself. "I'm sorry," she said weak-

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ly. "Better a h-hangover than hysterics."

Guido slid steaming plates before them. Claire forced her attention on the food and, by the time she had done, her troubled eyes had cleared.

After zabaglione and espresso, they crossed Greenwich Village to Washington Square. The outdoor art show was in full swing; the sunlit square was surrounded by colorful canvases and teeming with even more colorful people. Everyone they passed seemed happy and carefree; the woes of the workaday world were far away. It was a day for lovers, and the city was an enchanted place.

Claire felt it too, and her momentary breakdown was forgotten. "Simon," she said warmly. "Being here with you — now — all those horrible years have just faded away. They might almost never have been."

He nodded. "Like a dream. It can span generations, but you wake up to find you've been asleep for only a quarter of an hour."

That afternoon they went everywhere. They "saw the sights" like two honeymoon tourists, and they revisited all the places that were theirs alone. Even in the city's swarming canyons, there are grottoes known and sacred to a very few; little hideaways, back streets of particular charm, secret sentimental places where once something especially nice happened or a memorable word was spoken or a first kiss exchanged. For Claire and Simon, it was a magic time, but it was all too short.

Late evening found them tired and footsore, but happy, sipping champagne to the muted glissandi of a languid piano. They were surprised and mildly chagrined by an unexpected salutation.

"As I live and breathe, our two chauffeurs!" It was Rick Hodges, and he was rather high. "We owe you folks a drink. Come over to our table."

"Well ... we can't stay long," said Simon. "We, er, have a late engagement."

Somewhat reluctantly, they joined Rick and Felice in a far corner, and Rick sent waiters scurrying for more champagne. The two couples swapped old-acquaintance greetings and a précis of their day in the city. Rick and Felice had been to a matinee, and Rick had apparently been drinking since the final curtain. He explained the reason for that when, shortly, Felice excused herself from the table.

"Sweet girl, that," Simon said conversationally. "I take it there's an understanding."

"There was," said Rick in a gloomy voice. "Wanted to show her a good time today, 'cause this is our last one together."

"You mean, you are breaking up?"

"*She* doesn't know it yet," said Rick. "But it's all over. Wish to God it wasn't."

"Well..." said Simon, pondering a change of subject.

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"See, I'm going to jail," Rick blurted. "Not forever, maybe, but long enough to queer me with Felice."

Simon finished his champagne and made time-to-go noises.

"Hell, I can tell you people," Rick mumbled. "Never see you again. I'm a thief, see. I took some money didn't belong to me. Never mind the why and how. Then Felice came along and now I'm a different guy. But I can't put the money back and they're going to discover it missing any day."

Simon stood up, but Claire waved him back to his seat.

"That's why I came to town, to see Uncle Sylvester," the young man went on. "Got more money'n God. I pleaded with him for a loan — just a loan — to clear up my double entry. It's not really a *lot* of money. But no soap. Uncle Scrooge just preached at me. Made my bed, now lie in it."

"Sorry," was all Simon could think to say.

"Oh, I'm gonna try once more. See him later tonight, after I take Felice home. The money's right there. All the old skinflint has to do is move a fake Rembrandt and twiddle dial. Maybe I'll get it — some way — if I get drunk enough.

Claire sent Simon a look of alarm. But just then Felice returned to the table, and Rick threw off his black mood for one of affectionate banter. Simon and Claire stayed for one more drink. Then they thanked Rick for the treat, exchanged insincere promises to meet again, and departed.

In the foyer, Simon asked Claire to wait for a moment and went over to speak to the Maitre d'. Claire watched as the man trotted into an office and trotted out with a manila envelope. Simon transferred something from his pocket to the envelope, sealed it, gave the maitre a bill and made gestures toward the table occupied by Rick and Felice.

When he rejoined her and they were on the sidewalk, Claire said, "You sent Rick all your money, didn't you?"

Simon looked sheepish. "Almost all," he admitted. "There was two or three thousand dollars."

"And why, my good Samaritan?" Her eyes twinkled.

"Well, it wouldn't be much use to us much longer. I don't know what amount Rick embezzled, but it might help. And I didn't want to have your Cousin Scroo— Cousin Sylvester bashed in the head."

"Liar," she said adoringly. "You did it so Rick wouldn't be following — where we're going. Oh, Simon, I do love you!"

He hugged her, grinning. "Even sinners have a soft side."

"Darling," she said. "Let's go up to my place."

"Why, sure — if you want to."

"I have the key. Do you suppose it still *is* my place?"

"I imagine so," he said. "Your note was a will, in effect. It would have to

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be probated, or whatever, before they could remove any of your things. But what if the super or a neighbor should see us?"

"Not likely, at this time of night," she said. "As long as we don't make any noise getting in."

So they let themselves very quietly into her Gramercy Park apartment, and it was like coming home again. The familiar furniture, the pictures she had painted herself, the Brancusi replica he had given her last Christmas, a faint phantom of her perfume still in the air, one of their favorite Brailowsky records still on the stereo turntable.

"It's more our place than just mine, isn't it?" she said softly. "I like to think of it that way." She flicked switched on the stereo components and a quiet Chopin etude trickled liltingly into the room.

She wandered into the bedroom, sat down at her dressing table and lighted the two little lamps. Simon followed and watched with a pang of pity as she tenderly fondled the objects on the table — the cosmetics, the jewel box, the perfumes he had given her. A glittering necklace lay forlorn on the table top. She smiled at it, picked it up and held it to her throat, admiring it in the mirror. Suddenly she let it fall and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, Simon! To look at it, at me, and to know that this is all illusion! That the necklace is hanging on a fleshless collarbone...."

"Don't think like that, Claire," he said comfortingly. "You are here and whole now. *Now* is all that counts. We still have a few more hours, and each one is more precious than all the hours before."

"You don't realize," she said, getting to her feet. "What we've gone through — all those endless years — that was nothing. *This* is meant to be our hell. Having this one small day together and then nothing ever afterward. This is the real beginning of our punishment."

She moved restively about the room, bestowing a lingering touch on objects here and there. Suddenly, with a wordless snarl, Simon slammed a fist into the unoffending wall.

"What is it?" Claire asked in alarm.

"We've got to do something!" he said fiercely. "There's got to be some way. Down there in the guts of that damned ship there was nothing I could do. But now we're alive, we're on earth, we've got a fighting chance. And these last few hours are the only chance we'll ever have!"

She gave him a look full of sad and tender commiseration, but there was nothing helpful she could say.

"Something," he grated. "There must be something we can—" He straightened. "Claire!"

"Yes?"

"Absolution! A confession and then absolution! Clear the slate!"

"Simon," she said reasonably. "Neither of us is a Roman Catholic."

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He waved away that objection. "There *are* no religions in hell. We'll be whatever we choose to be. This is our only chance to choose."

"But even if we did, I don't think an *ex post facto*—"

"All right," he said impatiently. "So this is a foxhole conversion. It might work."

She sadly demurred. "Ask a priest to win us forgiveness for breaking the Sixth Commandment? Just so we can be free to go on breaking the Seventh?"

He sighed and slumped. "I suppose you're right. One way or another, we've got to pay."

There was silence in the room for a while. Simon leaned dejectedly against the door jamb. Claire sat down on the bed and toyed with a floppy rag doll that lay there. Then, for the first and only time, Simon said it:

"What would you give now ... not to have done it?"

He was surprised by her reaction to the cruel question. Slowly she smiled, and in her smile was the wisdom of ages, the innocence of childhood and the enigma of all womankind.

"Silly man," she said affectionately. "Not to know that it was worth it. Suppose, on that last night — instead of what we did — suppose we had been struck down by a car or killed in some commonplace accident. Don't you see? We would never have had *this* day!"

After a moment, Simon smiled ruefully and said, "In all eternity, I don't think I'll ever understand women."

"Not women. Me." She lay back and stretched out her arms invitingly. "Come to me, Simon."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and ran his fingers over her face as if memorizing its dear contours.

"I want to be close to you, darling," she said softly. "As close as I can possibly get. I want it to remember."

The rest of the night was indeed memorable. Each of them had ten centuries of deprivation to make up for. So the explosion between them was like that of a dam being dynamited, and the flood of release was an ecstasy never known by mere mortal lovers.

But their capacity for love-making and the time available for enjoying it ran out together. The pixie face of the clock on the dressing table told them that the hours before dawn were almost spent.

"I'll go with you," Simon said, "as far as I can."

"You mustn't," Claire told him. "It's a subway that somehow takes me one station beyond the end of the line. I'm sure it wouldn't if you came along, and that might make trouble for us. But I can catch the train down near where your ship is. We'll say goodbye there."

And so they took one last fond look around the beloved apartment, silenced Chopin and stole out with heavy hearts.

Beyond the pier buildings, the stacks of the dread ship were a sharper

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blackness against the black sky, and an intermittent ghost of white puffed out from some kind of vent up there.

"Steam is up," muttered Simon. "It's ready to pull out whenever I get on board."

"Not until the very last minute, dearest," said Claire, and then, in a small voice: "I wonder what would happen if we didn't go back at all."

Simon kicked morosely at the curbstone. "I suppose all this camouflage would drop away from me, and you'd run screaming in horror when you saw what I really look like."

"At any rate," Claire said resignedly, "we wouldn't last long. The people would hunt us down. Nobody could look on what we are and let us live."

Both of them gasped suddenly, as a dark form detached itself from the shadows of a building and shambled toward them. It was a craggy-faced, beared man; a seaman, from the clothes he wore.

"Ahoy, matey. Could I have a word—?"

Simon was justifiably exasperated. He plunged a hand into his pocket and brought it out full of coins. "Here. Beat it."

"No, no — hey — I ain't making no touch."

"What, then? We want to be alone!"

"It's like this, skipper. I just come ashore, see, but I'm short of folding money, owing to a three-week crap game in the foc'sle, and—"

"Come on, come on!" snapped Simon.

"Well, the only property I got to me name is this-here." The sailor hauled something out from under his pea jacket. "I ain't got a permit to fetch it ashore no-way, so I thought maybe I could sell it."

Simon stared at the object in the man's hand, and slowly his frown vanished. He looked at the seaman as at a deliverer, and began to scrabble through his pockets.

"Claire," he said in an odd voice. "Do you have any money?"

Puzzled, she delved into her bag while Simon came up with a few crumpled bills. Between them, they brought out sixty-three dollars.

"That's every cent we have," Simon said anxiously. "Will that do?"

"It'll serve to take the edge off my thirst, skipper," the sailor said. "Here — and you're getting a bargain. It cost me a hunnerd-fitty in Singapore."

The money changed hands and the man shambled off into the darkness, pausing only to call back, "Take care, mate. It's full loaded."

Claire looked at the flat blue pistol in Simon's hand and said, "I don't understand."

"Darling, this is our way out!" he exulted. "Remember? The sentence was 'subject to no review or appeal.' But suppose we force a whole new trial, a repetition of the sentence."

"I still don't—"

"'Commit the same crime all over

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again! Don't you see? We'll get the same sentence, with the same proviso. We'll have another day together. And then we'll do it again — and again."

"But suppose ... a different judge and jury might..."

"Precedent! Precedent!" he said. "They can't change the sentence for the same offense. Another thousand years, we can't escape that. But we'll be back here again, together, a few days from now!"

"Oh, if we only could," she breathed.

"Claire, we've got to try. There's a risk, yes. They may cross us up somehow. But what have we got to lose?"

Her eyes began to catch light from his.

"If we can do it, eternity is ours!" he exclaimed. "We'll be together forever, Claire!"

She thought it over. "We would, wouldn't we? How many thousands of years in an eternity?"

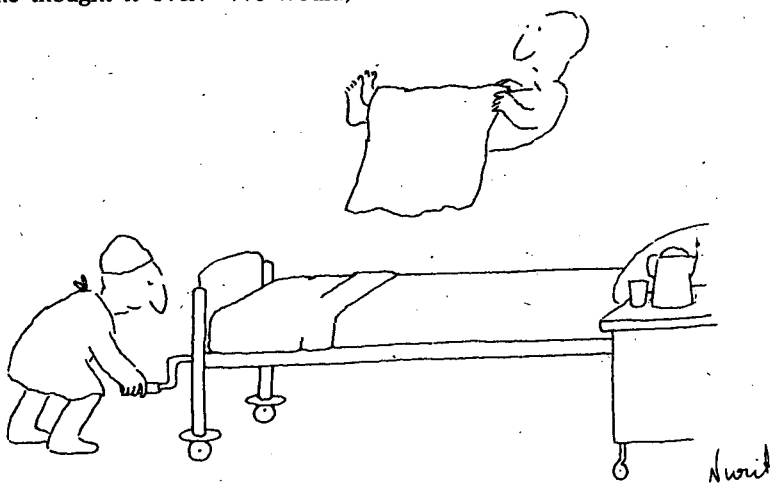
"How many springtime days like today?" he said. "and this time we won't forget. We'll remember each other and the city and this day ... because we'll always have another morning to look forward to."

The woman looked up at the sky. It was growing perceptibly lighter in the east. Objects about them were beginning to assume color and dimension.

"It's up to you, Claire," Simon said gently. "Darling, remember what you said? That today those thousand years were nothing — the memory of a bad dream."

Her face grew radiant, as the dawn quietly and peacefully unfolded all about them the promise of a new and beautiful day.

She closed her eyes and said with trusting calm, "First ... kiss me...."



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Alan Foster is primarily a novelist whose books include ICERIGGER *(1974) and several best-selling film novelizations, most recently* ALIEN. *This gripping tale about a street racing wizard named Bill Switch is his first F&SF story since 1976.*

The Last Run

BY

ALAN DEAN FOSTER

Banzai Runner ain't got no home
Empty highway is where he roam
Gas in his bloodstream
Oil on the brain
Make for a man who drives insane

Everyone knew Bill Switch didn't give a damn about death. People who indulged in the special type of street racing Bill enjoyed couldn't afford to think about it. Not that he and his competitors were *really* crazy. Just indifferent.

When he was fifteen, Switch took an old Willys Jeep belonging to his father and turned it into a passable street racer. Now, to fully appreciate what that means, you have to know something about the structure of a Willys Jeep. Bill's accomplishment was comparable to transforming a Mexican plaster pot into something out of Benvenuto Cellini.

When they sent him to Nam they had the rare good sense to assign him to a motor pool. Bill spent a perfectly happy war toying with armored personnel carriers and trucks. He turbocharged a tank long before pentagon researchers and the Chrysler Corporation decided that would be a good idea.

When he came back he opened his own little garage. Specialty work. It could have made him rich. God knows how many professional racing teams wanted the wizard of San Bernardino prepping their formula ones.

Bill always turned them down. That wasn't his style. He got his satisfaction from tricking up street cars and then beating their owners with his own machines. The streets of Southern California became his racetrack, the free-

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way system his Indianapolis 500.

There were a few others who felt the way Bill did about street racing. Most of them knew Bill, or of him. If they didn't know him they found out fast enough when the quiet big man beat the crap out of them some night on the freeway.

See, Bill Switch and these few others, they weren't your usual street racer. They didn't match hopped-up Fords on Kester in the Valley or low-riding Chevys on the East Side. To this little group, getting a street car up to a hundred fifty wasn't worth the gas it burnt.

They did their racing on the freeways that encircle greater Los Angeles, in the early morning dark when few other cars were on the road and when the Highway Patrol could look the other way in search of stranded campers and groping adolescents.

A race could cover twenty miles to a hundred or more. The men and women who matched up this way were usually very rich. They had to be, to afford the cars they used. You couldn't call them hot rodders, or street racers.

Even the police called them banzai runners.

Banzai Runner, you better watch out
Check your real-view mirror
Got Smokey in a dither
Gonna try and getcha whether
You're ready or not

I knew Bill because once in a while he deigned to work on my Corvette, a pretty but unmuscular '69 with side pipes but little else. Nice little commuter car, suitable for old ladies and men with delusions of grandeur. Bill's shop was in San Berdoo, and I'd unknowingly dropped by there one day in hopes of getting one of the custom mufflers replaced.

Well, Bill took pity on me and repaired the muffler. He also did something unseen under the hood which took five years and fifty thousand miles off that 'vette's life. In the unpredictable manner of events, we became friends. Not real close. Just Hi, howareya, smile and wave. That sort of thing. Bill liked to pick my brain, which I willingly gave him access to. In turn, he'd usually let me know on what night he'd have a little match race set up.

I'll never forget that particular night. Sultry Southern California September midnight, all gray outlines clad in tropical overtones. There were two challenging Bill. It's unusual for more than one at a time to take on a competitor. Bill relished the opportunity.

One of them was a prominent actor. You'd recognize the name, so I better keep my mouth shut, just in case. I'm not the litigious type.

He drove a Ferrari Boxer. Decent car, smooth of line and painted fire-engine red as a whore's nail polish. The actor shammied it lovingly, boasting to anyone who'd listen how he was going to cream the Wisp's ass. That was Bill's nickname. The Wisp, as in Will-o'-the.

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In his enthusiasm he forgot about the other driver. He shut up a little when the rest of the competition drove up.

The man who climbed out of the driver's seat wasn't much over five feet in height. He was a plastic surgeon who'd driven all the way out from Beverly Hills just for the race. What you could interpret through the single-piece beige driving suit had about as much fat on it as a culotte steak, despite the body's sixty years.

His car was a Lambourghini Countach, silver, tricked up with special front and rear spoilers, special flare work, and a suspension low enough to decapitate any caterpillar that didn't duck. When he revved that engine it sounded like one of the turbines at Hoover Dam, where I once spent an awed summer day.

The actor paled a little, but then his resolve stiffened and he climbed back into his own car. The Ferrari was tuned perfectly. Its driver might be intimidated but the Boxer was not.

Then Bill arrived. The starting point was just past the Kaiser Steel plant in Fontana. The race would be a short one, just a few miles to the Highland off-ramp. The surgeon and the actor had their first look at Bill's famous Wisp car. They started to laugh, thought better of it, and ended up by looking plain confused.

Bill drove what appeared to be a stock Plymouth station wagon, painted powder blue, with blue curtains on the windows. Except for the low front shocks and oversized tires it would not have looked out of place carrying groceries from a supermarket.

The actor and the surgeon put their confusion aside and turned serious. Each of them, Bill included, had put up ten thousand, winner take all. The three cars eased out onto the freeway. This early in the morning the little-used stretch of concrete was empty.

The starter fired his pistol. The Lambourghini bellowed and the Ferrari rumbled. You could hardly hear Bill's engine among them.

There was a soft, rising growl from the three cars as they accelerated. I waited with a couple of others at the halfway point, our own cars parked inconspicuously on the shoulder.

As they neared we could see that the Countach was slightly in the lead, the Boxer close but seemingly losing ground, with Bill bringing up the rear. I was trying to watch the surgeon's face through my night binoculars. At the moment he didn't wear the expression of a man I'd want slicing into my guts.

Suddenly above the steady roar a new tone sounded, a deep-throated barrooommm like a five-hundred-pound bomb going off. The Wisp materialized from the darkness. I clocked the Countach at two hundred and thirty miles per as they passed us. The Wisp went by it like a Harley passing a training bike. I wish I could've seen what the surgeon was thinking.

There was a real explosion soon

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after, as the Countach's straining engine blew. We rushed out and helped the doctor from his car. Somebody put a fire extinguisher on it. Fifty thousand bucks, up in pouf.

The actor lasted a minute or so longer, but slow and steady wasn't going to win this race. He pulled off the freeway too fast to slow down in time, lost control. The Boxer ended up among the heavily taxed grape vines. He came out shaken, more concerned for his face than the car.

Ready or not don't worry Wisp none
Over two hundred he's just havin' fun
Lambourghini blown its engine
Ferrari in the ditch
Ain't a one can catch that Wisp,
Bill Switch

I was the only one to drive out to meet Bill. He'd pulled off onto Highland, the street as deserted as the freeway. He was lying on a crawly under the car, using a light. He barely fit. Bill Switch was six five, weighed two forty, and couldn't look nasty-mean if he had to.

"Hi," he called out to my feet. "How're the others?"

"Okay. The surgeon had guts. He gave it everything he had."

"Yeah," echoed Bill's voice from beneath the station wagon. "You put some of these respectable citizen types in a real vehicle, they go from Jekyll to Hyde in seconds."

Bill had a 454 Chevy under the hood of the wagon. But that was for casual racing, for going to the market. It only powered the front wheels. Taking up most of the back of the wagon and connected to the rear drive train was a 900-hp Pratt and Whitney aircraft engine, built to go into small racing planes, the kind that zip and snort around checkered pylons. Bill would use the 454 to toy his opponents and then he'd kick in that hibernating airplane plant. With turbocharging, that boosted his total horsepower *way* up over a thousand. That station wagon looked stock, but it had more bracing inside than the Brooklyn Bridge.

But Bill wasn't satisfied. He told me that someday he wanted to put a jet engine into a van, if he could figure out a way to stabilize the damn thing.

We were all alone, with the grape vines and crickets. The others were still helping to tow the doctor's Countach off the freeway and pull the Boxer from the vineyard, when the stranger drove up.

It eased out from the dark hole beneath the overpass and pulled up behind the Wisp wagon. It was painted the blackest black I'd ever seen, so black it was almost purple. Must've been thirty coats of lacquer on it. The headlights burned red because of the special rock shields over them.

I didn't recognize the car, but, then, I was hardly an expert. It wasn't an Indy type, not formula. It didn't look like a Lotus or the custom Mazda. It hardly had any lines at all. The windshield was barely six inches high.

The driver who stepped out was

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dressed in matching black, a fashion affected by many runners (Bill preferred Jeans and a sweatshirt). He was as tall as Bill but much thinner. I guessed him to be in his forties and wondered what he did for a living. The occupations of banzai runners were often as interesting as their cars.

He leaned against the wagon and waited patiently, smiling unpleasantly at me while he waited for Bill to emerge. The crawly squeeked. Bill saw the newcomer, rose, wiped his hands. His gaze flicked past him to the ebony car behind.

"I hear you like racing," said the stranger. He nodded toward the freeway. "You just proved that you could. How'd you like to race me?"

Banzai Runner got a challenge now
Funny sort o' guy
Has fire in his eye
Talks funny, kinda wry
And his car ... oh, wow!

Bill rubbed his nose. "I don't know. Don't know your car. That's something of a first for me."

The stranger's grin widened. "It's an import. Not Italian, not French."

"Israeli? I hear they're doing some interesting things over there."

The man shook his head. "Not Japanese, either. It's kind of a hybrid of my own design. Does that matter?"

"Nope. Not to me. Just curious."

"They say you're the best."

Now it was Bill's turn to smile. "They're right."

"I've got five hundred thousand here. In unmarked hundred dollar bills. That'd buy you the engine you want and plenty of time to play with it. You'd never have to work on another old lady's car."

Bill eyed the money. "I can't match that, not even if I threw in my shop in the bargain."

"I wouldn't have any use for your shop," said the stranger.

"Then what'll I bet?"

The stranger put his arm around Bill's shoulders and the two of them walked out into the grape vines. My skin was beginning to crawl and I was having cold chills despite the heat of the night. I didn't like this guy. I didn't like his smile, his attitude, the funny moan his idling black stiletto of a car made.

None of it seemed to trouble Bill. They strolled back toward the road and I could see them shaking hands. I felt bad about it, but it wasn't my decision to make.

"To be fair we should test endurance as well as speed," the stranger was saying. "Of the drivers as well as the cars."

"I'm agreeable," said Bill thoughtfully. "How about from Indio to the border? First one across the bridge is the winner."

The Wisp never turned a challenge down
No black-clad stranger's about to make
him frown
San Berdoo to the River
Only two hundred mile
"It's a race," said the stranger,
with a terrible smile

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"Sounds exciting," said the other driver.

Bill nodded toward the black car. "You run on alcohol?"

The stranger shook his head. "Something not nearly so exotic. I propose next Monday night, at two a.m."

"Good enough."

Bill never worked as hard as he did that following week. I saw him in his shop on Thursday and he barely glanced up long enough to acknowledge my presence. I knew he was seeing that half million and the jet engine van he'd dreamed of.

I asked Mario, one of his mechanics, what Bill was up to in the stern of the powder-blue wagon.

"Beats the hell out of me, man. He's puttin' in some kind of overdrive or somethin'. Tryin' to drag another five hundred horse out of it."

I shook my head. "He's crazy. He'll blow himself up, over that distance."

"It's not for the whole race, I think." The mechanic spat on the oil-stained concrete. "If anybody can do it, the Wisp can."

I was waiting across the bridge Monday night morning. Not too many people knew about the race. Those who did were spread out along the length of the chosen route. A big crowd would tip off the Highway Patrol that something unusual was up. We all had CB's and hf monitors, both to keep track of the man and warn over the truckers.

I didn't see the start, of course, but we could follow the progress over the CB's.

They started out near even. By the time they passed Desert Center, Bill had pulled slightly ahead. The four fifty-four and the Pratt and Whitney were doing their job, meshing efficiently, burning up fuel and distance with incredible precision. Later we learned that the noise was so loud the people in Desert Center woke up and badgered Civil Defense, wanting to know if the munitions depot outside Barstow had gone up.

Banzai Runner on Interstate Ten
Doin' two hundred twenty-five
Hardly a man alive
Could match that drive
Only somethin' far past human ken

Outside Blythe, coming up on the last leg of the race, the stranger made his move. The spectators assembled there said the black car didn't roar or rumble, just gave out a kind of rising shriek that steadily intensified, until it finally drowned out even the Pratt and Whitney.

Someone with binocs said she got a look at Bill's face as he went by and that it was taut and sweaty. No fear, though. Not in Bill Switch.

We had our first glimpse of them as they roared through town. Sirens began to sound all over the place as the Highway Patrol's patience finally ran out. But there wasn't much they could do except watch until the runners burned themselves out. No patrol car could catch a banzai runner.

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The black car was in the lead. We could make out those flaming headlights clearly from our position on the bluff across the Colorado.

Then there sounded a distinct explosion, like a plummeting jumbo jet. Lights were winking on all over the sleeping town as the citizens awoke to something unnatural in their midst.

That black demon car was pulling ahead
Watchers 'cross the River thought the
Wisp was dead
The Wisp looked down
Kicked the overdrive in
Came up on that demon near enough
to win

The explosion was the sound of Bill kicking in his special trick overdrive. Through our scopes and binoculars we could clearly see the pale station wagon pulling up, making ground on the black racer. They were barely a mile from the California side of the bridge. First one across would win. Then they were even, and then, unbelievably, Bill was ahead!

Those monster engines were making too much noise for us to hear the tire blow. At nearly three hundred miles an hour Bill's car swerved left. He fought to straighten out, brought it momentarily back on line before it squealed rightward. It went through the flimsy guard rail, hit a bump, and soared gracefully into the air, describing an arc like a dying pelican as it fell. Even this far south the breadth of the Colorado was substantial. The Wisp didn't make much of a splash. There was no explosion. It must've gone straight to the bottom.

Banzai Runner you've gone too fast
At two ninety-six
The accelerator sticks
Flesh and rock don't mix
Road and bridge you've passed

I never saw a car going that fast brake as rapidly as that black bullet. The driver went only a mile or two into Arizona before slowing enough to turn round and rush back toward us. He parked and climbed out, and you could see that he'd been in a race. His formerly icy demeanor was shattered, and that unshakable self-confidence I'd seen in him that night in San Bernardino was missing. He'd won, but barely. If Bill hadn't lost that tire it might've been a different story, and the stranger knew it.

He gazed respectfully down at the limpid sheet of gray that was the Colorado. I was nearest to him. Most of the others had scrambled down the bluff, and a few were already swimming out to where Bill's wagon had sunk. I knew they wouldn't find a thing. So did the stranger standing next to me. I moved a couple of steps away from him.

The Devil slowed down and got
outta his car
That was powered by souls
who'd fallen too far
Eyed the wreck in the River
That held Bill Switch
Said, "You nearly beat me boy,
I'm sorry 'bout the hitch"

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"Tell me," I asked hesitantly, "if the tire had held, *could* he have beaten you?"

The stranger considered. "I don't honestly know." He smiled down at me. "Of course, you can't believe anything I say, can you?" I noticed now that his eyes were yellow, and it wasn't due to contact lenses. Funny that I hadn't picked up on that before. Or maybe I hadn't wanted to.

I'm not an especially brave man, but I have an unreasonable disregard for death. So I said, "I think he had you beat cleanly."

Those awful pupils brightened ever so slightly, just enough to make me tremble a little. But I had made no bet with this banzai runner, and he knew it.

Banzai Runner, you've lost your soul
Now the Devil take you home
On his hot roads to roam
Cars of fire, not of chrome
No more chance to rock n' roll.

"Could be he had. He was the best I've ever raced against. He was better than his machine, which is unusual in a man. Very unusual. But he lost." He turned and started back toward his car. I heard him mumbling to himself.

"Maybe some of the forfeit is salvageable. We'll see."

I never saw that black car or its driver again, and I never hope to. I no longer go out in the dark hours of early morning to watch the banzai runners race. I just stick to my papers and pen advertising jingles.

Oh, and I never exceed the speed limit. Someone might think to challenge me to a race.

Now the Devil knows a good thing
whenever he sees it
Gave the Wisp a uniform and
driver's work kit
So the next bus you board
Better listen to the bell
Might be the Devil's chauffeur
Wisp drivin' you down to
Hell....

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Reid Collins ("The Bookkeeper," Sept 1978) has been a news correspondent for CBS since 1964. He is currently based in New York, where he writes and broadcasts hourly newscasts Monday through Friday on the radio network. His fiction has appeared in Field and Stream *and* Gray's Sporting Journal.

The Buck

BY
REID COLLINS

He knew from the solidity of the impact that the shot was true, as if the recoil from the body of the deer had sent a shock wave back along the line of fire and added an extra jolt in his shoulder. So he moved almost leisurely down the slope and around the brush stand, confident of what he would find.

Automatically, he searched out the little tuft of white hair flecked with blood. It was there, in the brush, past the spot where the deer's hoofs had torn up the forest floor. He walked a few paces along the track line to the body of the buck. It had been carried out of its track by the bullet that drove through its body and put the clotted tuft of exit hair in the brush. In death, the deer had leaped a few feet farther before all of the magic had drained out and it had fallen. A clean shot it was, neck-base, right where he had aimed through the open irons. He could not recall the last time he had used the scope. It may have been on the mules in Colorado. In recent years he had tracked, thinking as a deer would think, in ever-tightening circles, sometimes tracing across their diameters, and always he would come out on top, uprange, and would simply have to wait, with an open-sight shot so clean and solid that he seldom if ever even levered a second shell into the Marlin 30-30.

It was a fork buck, sleek and well-made for upstate New York, just three hours drive from the city. Not like the big mulies of the West by a damn sight; nothing to match the two racks that gleamed on the wall of his brownstone den in Manhattan. But these whitetail commended themselves to this kind of heavy hardwood-forest hunting: trailing and circling.

He mused as he eased the drop-

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point blade into the wind pipe, split out the musk glands on the rear legs, and began the long slide just beneath the skin of the soft belly. His hands warmed and blooded with the work. He felt the rubbery peritoneum slip through his practiced fingers, knicked the cornices of the diaphragm and pulled it away to reveal heart, lungs. He removed the liver, flicking away the little blobs of fat and placing it on a piece of paper. There was a spring outcropping not far. He wedged two branches into the steaming cavity, glanced briefly into the filming eyes of the buck, and made for the spring.

He laved the deer liver in the outflow, letting the blood from the gutting leave his hands as well. When the liver was free and clean, he cut a piece, two pieces, thinly sliced for frying back at camp. But, why not? He put a slice into his mouth. Another. It was the source of life exploding on his tongue. He resisted taking more and hurried back to the kill.

When he had finished the field dressing, dumped the guts and genitals downhill and further propped open the cavity, he hoisted the corpse across his shoulders and started. Had he heard something, or merely felt it? He twisted his head toward the origin point. Then he looked up through the trunks and branches and stared for a long moment at the pale filtered sun. Two hundred yards away a beech tree had surrendered a tiny bit of mast to the forest floor, nothing more.

At the camp he put a rope around its neck and pulled the deer off the ground on the center beam that extended from the cabin for that purpose. The buck's forelegs dangled on its chest wall, and its eyes were beginning to collapse.

Inside, he washed by kerosene light, put the heart and liver on ice, and heated butter in the small frying pan. He got the whiskey bottle from the cabinet and poured a drink. He reeled and spat it into the sink. It must be bad, but how could whiskey go bad? He smelled the bottle and it gagged him. He thin-sliced the liver and ate it with his bare hands as the kerosene lamp died little by little on the table. He got up and made his way to the bedroom where he fell exhausted upon his cot.

He had tried to keep count, but two years ago he had gotten confused as to whether the Pacific Coast blacktail was his 137th or 139th deer. His wife had long since stopped counting or caring, and he had not had the confidence in her interest even to tell her of his dilemma. So this fork buck was around the 140th. He wished he'd kept all the racks, even the spikes; but, then, that wouldn't tell how many doe he'd taken in the various legal doe seasons or the Maine camp meat-poachings. These whitetail in the East are little, though, and he fell asleep remembering the big mules in the high open country of Colorado and Montana. It must have been there that he had last used the scope.

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When he came awake he was aware first of dampness. Then he was cold. It was first light, not seeable yet. And he was out of doors. Slowly he raised his head. He was in a thicket of hemlock not far from camp. He waited a moment, turned his head toward the light that grew on the far hillside. As he watched daylight come, he recorded the tick of beech mast coming down — there — and another — and he froze to the sharper snap of a dry stick breaking just beyond him. A doe was on the move, ten yards away. She was coming head down, along the trail that entered his hemlock stand. She must see him there, directly in the path. Suddenly she swung her head up and stopped. Frozen, she looked at him. Then her widened eyes relaxed. She swung easily to the side and bit at a fresh sprig growing from the nearest tree. He raised his head farther. She swung back to look at him, then closed her eyes and continued to feed.

He got up slowly and walked out of the stand of trees, locating the cabin in the growing light. It was a hundred yards distant. Halfway there, he turned around and the doe was gone.

His buck remained trussed and hoist from the beam. He ate the remainder of the liver. Looking at the rising sun, his eyes began to ache and his temples pulsed. He got aspirin from the medicine box and went down to the spring. He got water into the cup, but discovered that he spat out the aspirin the moment they touched his tongue. Twice he tried, but the involuntary reflex could not be overcome. He went back to the camp and lay beneath a tree, looking at the sun and feeling his temples pulse.

En route to the city the tagged deer was inspected at one station. He did not speak to the warden, but simply responded with his license when asked. The lights of the thruway sent painful thrusts into his eyes, and he hardly remembered getting the car wound into the city and the carcass into the back room where he butchered it after three days of stiffening. His wife had said nothing. He had said nothing.

Two weeks later the pain drove him to his ophthalmologist. In the Fifties on Park Avenue was the waiting room with new magazines and an English receptionist and freshly poured coffee and Mozart leaking from the walls.

The routine examination stopped midway. A tenography? Deaden his eyeballs and run that pressure gauge over them? But that was for glaucoma. Surely he did not have that.

The ophthalmologist said no, but he had seen some unusual development in the rods and cones, a richness of blood not indicative of a pressure problem, but to be safe —

So he allowed the doctor to put anesthetic into his eyes, and he lay still as a stone, staring at a red light bulb on the ceiling as the physician ran the snail-like gauge over his eyeballs.

At a point he cried in pain. No, not

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in the eye. It was his temple. The doctor had touched his temple. Where? the physician asked. There? He touched it once more.

God! God Almighty!

He sat upright and was staring at the doctor with wide deadened eyes. "What was that?" He screamed.

"I merely touched your head, old boy. Now, please —"

"No. *That.* Outside."

"Outside the examining room? Why, nothing."

"No. Not nothing. I heard it."

The doctor went outside, closing the door behind him. He returned, smiled, and said, "There's nothing there. Not even Elizabeth."

"Of course not. She left. She just left."

"Why," the doctor looked at his watch. "Yes. It is exactly the time at which she leaves to fetch scones and — why — how did you know that she had left?"

"Are we finished? About finished?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps we are. You must leave? Well, I shall have my report to you in the mail within the week. Perhaps with a referral. You are all right? Remember, now, your eyes have been deadened. You are not to rub them or get anything into them."

And he left. He found himself staring across Park Avenue and up beyond its buildings, at the sun. The city's sound was as surf in his ears, but by turning his head he could winnow out the rest and hear the squeak of a baby carriage two blocks down or the click of a window latching high above the streets. He went home and fell asleep looking at the grow light his wife had installed over the terrarium.

It was dark when he awakened. He had heard his wife come in, he knew, and had turned his head to follow her sound as she had gone upstairs, gotten ready for bed, and padded about the upper hall. But he had done this at a level below wakefulness.

He switched on the reading lamp and found he was in his den with the big Colorado mule bucks ranged on the wall above him. He took down a book. Idly, he riffled the pages and stirred as he read. "It was not such a real mystery if one understands about photoperiodicity, the length of daylight a deer records with its eyes. That is what regulates antler growth, starts the pedicle to expanding in readiness for the horn." He drank from the canteen of spring water he had brought back. Tap water gagged him, as if he still were trying to swallow aspirin. He had given up on aspirin, enduring pain now, until it had become a sweet companion that sickened him occasionally and forced him to sit on the curb and look at the sun.

He had told the firm and his wife that he was growing a beard, and he *was* growing a beard, but because the look of his eyes in the mirror surprised and haunted him and he could not bear to shave with tainted chlorinated tap water all over his face, drowning the

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odor of himself, his clothes and the street. Warily he went forth, and paid no attention to the crowds who skirted him as he sat on the curb looking at the sun.

Now, in the den with the mule deer corpses frozen over him, he was seized by longing edged with panic. When first light struck the towers of the World Trade Center he was 50 miles up Route 17, windows down, reeling with the swaths of scent that swept the roadway. Shaggy and wide-orbed he drove. It was twilight when he reached his place but he didn't unlock the door.

At first light he was at the spring. The water under the film of water-skates and cobwebs was as sweet as honey, cold as stone, and he drank it in long draughts, leaving his hat where it fell in the pool. An autumn mist wound through the hardwoods, and a mile away he heard the first stirrings of a turkey flock rearranging itself on its roost. The tap of a beech nut hitting the mantle of the forest three hundred yards away brought his head up and around. He dismissed the sound and moved on. He found relief on the low branches of some blazing sumac, rubbing the pain out of his temples, back and forth and up and down, until the branches themselves were barked and bare. He felt better, alive, and freed from the pain. He trotted on, moving easily along the trails, picking up a scent, circling above, and finding the scent circling higher. He cut across the circle and ran swiftly ahead, then circled back and froze. It would be easy, a shot with the open irons, no scope needed. He waited. It came on, paused, and walked out of the brush just below him. It turned, but apparently could not detect him, unmoving as he was. Yes, now it was staring at him. It did make him out. But it did not break for the brush. Instead, it raised a rifle to its shoulder, aimed and fired.

He flew uphill with the shock of it, took some blind steps and tried to jump over a windfall, but the side of the mountain tilted upward, and he leaned against it. He raised his head from where he lay and heard the man shouting: "Jesus! Harry! Over here! *I got 'im.* A buck! God, he's a *buck!* He's down right up there!"

He heard heavy panting as the hunter climbed toward him, and he smelled the winey scent of talcum and aftershave and looked at the sunlight filtering through the hardwoods and put his head back down. He could hear no longer when the man reached him and began to scream.

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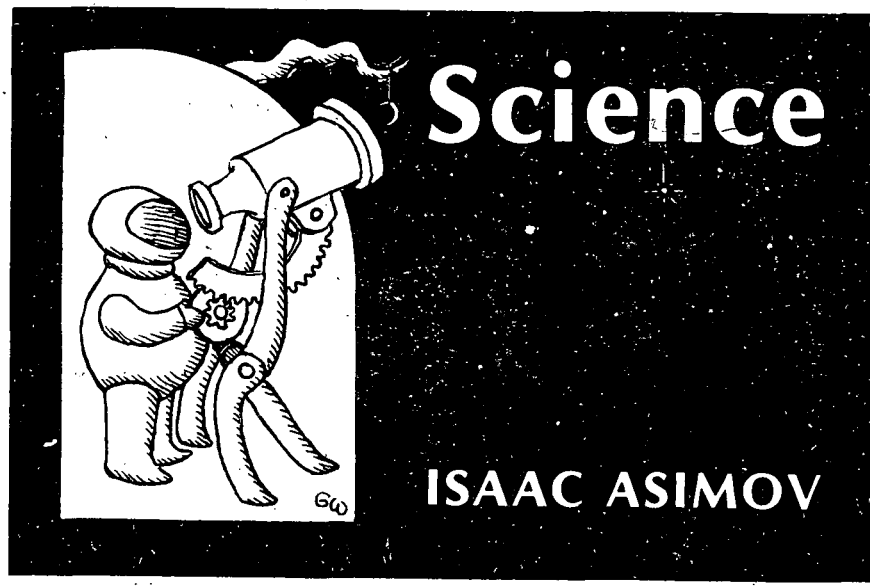

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE THREE WHO DIED TOO SOON

I have just returned from the Philcon — the annual convention sponsored by the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society.

It was extremely successful, I thought. It was well-attended, efficiently run, with an excellent art show and a bustling huckster room. Joe Haldeman was the guest of honor and gave an absolute whiz-bang of a talk that was greeted with great enthusiasm by the audience. This cast me down, I fear, for I was scheduled to follow him and I had to extend myself to the full, I assure you.

But what I enjoyed the most was the costume show that was won by a young man who had designed an unbelievably clever "satyr" costume. He carried a pipes-of-Pan about his neck, wore horns that blended perfectly with his hair, and capered about on goat-legs that looked like the real thing.

My own private pleasure reached its peak, though, when three people came out on stage to the accompaniment of portentous music in order to represent "Foundation," "Foundation and Empire," and "Second Foundation," the three parts of my well-known "Foundation Trilogy." They were

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all three swathed in black robes and all looked sombre. I watched curiously, wondering how they could possibly represent those three highly intellectual novels.

Suddenly, all three flashed — flinging open their robes and revealing themselves as three very incompletely-clothed young people. The first and third were young men, in whom my interest was necessarily limited, and who were each wearing very little more than corsets (the first and second "foundaton," as I at once understood).

The middle person was a young woman of pronounced beauty, both of face and figure, and she wore a corset, too. She, however, was "Foundation and Empire," and the Empire portion, I gathered, was the only other item she wore — a brassiere that did a delightfully poor job of concealing what it was meant to support.

After a few moments of surprise and enchantment, my scientific training asserted itself. If careful observation is required, it must be made under the most favorable conditions. I therefore stood up and leaned forward.

Whereupon, from near me, a voice could be heard, saying. "That's five bucks you owe me. He stood up."

That was a sensationally easy bet to win — and another sensationally easy bet to win is that I will now proceed with still a third essay on the electromagnetic spectrum.

In the last two essays, I discussed visible light, infrared radiation and ultraviolet radiation. The frequencies in question ranged from as little as 0.3 trillion cycles per second for the lowest frequency infrared to as much as 30,000 trillion cycles per second for the highest frequency ultraviolet.

In 1864, however, as I said, James Clerk Maxwell (1813-1879) had evolved a theory that made it seem that such radiations arose from an oscillating electromagnetic field (hence, "electromagnetic radiation") and that the frequency could be any value from much higher that 30,000 trillion cycles per second to much lower than 0.3 trillion cycles per second.

A good, air-tight, well-thought-out theory is a delight, but it becomes even more delightful if some phenomenon that has never been observed is predicted by the theory — and is then observed. The theory points, and you look, and, behold! it's there. The chances of doing so, however, did not seem great.

It is possible to make an electric current (and hence an electromagnetic field) oscillate. Such oscillations are comparatively slow, however, and if, as is predicted by Maxwell's equations, they produce an electromagnetic

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radiation, the frequency would be far lower than even the lowest frequency infrared radiation. Millions of times lower. Surely, the detection methods that worked for the familiar radiations in the region of light and its immediate neighbors would not work for something so far removed in properties.

Yet detected it would have to be — and in such detail that the waves could be shown to have the nature and properties of light.

Actually, the thought of oscillating electric currents producing some sort of radiation antedated Maxwell.

The American physicist Joseph Henry (1799-1878) had discovered the principle of "self-induction" in 1832 (I won't go into that or I'll never get through the ground I want to cover in this essay). In 1842, he tackled certain confusing observations that made it seem uncertain, in some cases, in which direction an electric current was moving. Under certain conditions, in fact, it seemed to be moving in both directions.

Henry, using his self-induction principle, reasoned that when a Leyden jar (or a capacitor, generally) is discharged, for instance, it overshoots the mark, so that a current flows out, then finds it must flow back, overshoots the mark again, flows in the first direction and so on. In short, the electric current oscillates much as a spring might. What's more, it can be a damped oscillation, such that each overshooting of the mark is less than the one before until the current flow settles down to zero.

Henry knew that a current flow produced an effect at a distance (it would make the needle of a distant magnetic compass veer, for instance), and felt that this effect would change and shift with the oscillations so that one would have a wave-like radiation issuing out from the oscillating current. He even compared the radiation to light.

This was just a vague speculation with Henry, but it is a distinguishing mark of great scientists that even their vague speculations have an uncanny habit of being right. Nevertheless, it was Maxwell, a quarter-century later, who reduced the whole matter to a clear mathematical statement, and it is he who deserves the credit.

Not all scientists accepted Maxwell's reasoning, however. One who didn't was the Irish physicist George Francis FitzGerald (1851-1901), who wrote a paper categorically maintaining that it was impossible for oscillating electric currents to produce wave-like radiations. (FitzGerald is very well-known by name to science fiction readers, or should be, since it was he who originated the concept of "the FitzGerald contraction.")

It was quite possible that scientists might choose up sides, some follow-

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ing Maxwell and some FitzGerald, and argue over the matter forever, unless the electric-oscillation waves were actually detected, or unless some observation were made that clearly showed such waves to be impossible.

It's not surprising, then, that Maxwell would feel keenly the importance of detecting these very low frequency waves. It was with dejection that he felt locating them was so difficult as to be next door to impossible. When Maxwell died of cancer in 1879 at the age of 48, the oscillation waves had not yet been detected.

And then, in 1888, a 31-year-old German physicist, Heinrich Rudolf Hertz (1857-1894), managed to do the job and to establish Maxwell's theory on a firm observational foundation. Had Maxwell lived, his pleasure at seeing that establishment would have been outdistanced, I am sure, by his surprise at seeing how easy the detection was and how simply it was managed.

All Hertz needed was a rectangular wire, with one side adjustable so that it could be moved in and out, and the opposite side possessing a small gap. The wire at each side of the gap ended in a small brass knob. If a current were somehow started in that rectangular wire, it could leap the gap, producing a small spark.

Hertz then set up an oscillating current by discharging a Leyden jar. If it produced electromagnetic waves, as Maxwell's equations predicted, those waves would induce an electric current in Hertz's rectangular detector (to which no other source of electricity was attached, of course). A spark would then be produced across the gap, and this would be visible evidence of the induced electric current, and, therefore, of the waves that did the inducing.

Hertz got his sparks.

By moving his receiver about in different directions and at different distances from the oscillating current that was the source of the waves, Hertz found the sparks growing more intense in places and less intense in others as the waves were at higher or lower amplitude. He could, in this way, map out the waves, determine the wavelength, and show that they could be reflected, refracted, and made to exhibit interference phenomena. He could even detect both electric and magnetic properties. In short, he found the waves entirely similar to light, except for their wavelengths, which were in the meter-range rather than the micrometer-range. Maxwell's electromagnetic theory was well and truly demonstrated, nine years after Maxwell's death.

The new waves and their properties were quickly confirmed by other observers and they were termed "Hertzian waves."

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Neither Hertz nor any of those who confirmed his findings saw the discovery as of any importance other than as the demonstration of the truth of an elegant scientific theory.

In 1892, however, the English physicist William Crookes (1832-1919) suggested that Hertzian waves might be used for communication. They moved in straight lines at the speed of light, but were so long-wave that objects of ordinary size were simply not opaque to them. The long waves moved around and through obstacles. The waves were easily detected and, if they could be started and stopped in a careful pattern, they could produce the dots and dashes of the telegraphic Morse code — and without the need of the complicated and expensive system of thousands of kilometers of copper wires and relays. Crookes was, in short, suggesting the possibility of "wireless telegraphy."

The idea must have sounded like "science fiction" (in the pejorative sense used by ignorant snobs), and Hertz, alas, did not see it come true. He died in 1894, at the age of 42, of a chronic infection that, these days, would probably have been easily cured by antibiotics.

Only months after Hertz's death, however, an Italian engineer, Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937), then only twenty years old, read of Hertz's findings, and instantly got the same idea Crookes had had.

Marconi used the same system for producing Hertzian waves that Hertz himself had used, but set up a much improved detector, a so-called "coherer." This consisted of a container of loosely-packed metal filings, which ordinarily conducted little current, but conducted quite a bit when Hertzian waves fell upon it.

Gradually, Marconi improved his instruments, grounding both the transmitter and receiver. He also used a wire, insulated from the earth, which served as an antenna or aerial to facilitate both sending and receiving.

He sent signals across greater and greater distances. In 1895, he sent a signal from his house to his garden and, later, across a distance of over a kilometer. In 1896, when the Italian government showed itself uninterested in his work, he went to England (his mother was Irish and Marconi could speak English) and sent a signal across a distance of 14 kilometers. He then applied for and received the first patent in the history of wireless telegraphy.

In 1897, again in Italy, he sent a signal from land to a warship 20 kilometers away, and in 1898 (back in England) he sent a signal across a distance of 30 kilometers.

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He was beginning to make his system known. The 74-year-old British physicist, Lord Kelvin, paid to send a "Marconigram" to his friend, the British physicist, G.G. Stokes, then 79 years old. This communication between two aged scientists was the first commercial message by wireless telegraphy. Marconi also used his signals to report the yacht races at Kingstown Regatta that year.

In 1901, Marconi approached the climax. His experiments had already convinced him that Hertzian waves followed the curve of the Earth instead of radiating straight outward into space as electromagnetic waves might be expected to do. (It was eventually found that Hertzian waves were reflected by the charged particles in the "ionosphere," a region of the upper atmosphere. They traveled around Earth's bulge by bouncing back and forth between ground and ionosphere.) He made elaborate preparations, therefore, to send a Hertzian-wave signal from the southwest tip of England across the Atlantic to Newfoundland, using balloons to lift the antennae as high as possible. On December 12, 1901, he succeeded.

To the British, the technique has remained "wireless telegraphy" and the phrase is usually shortened to "wireless."

In the United States, the technique was called "radio-telegraphy" meaning that the key carrier of the signal was an electromagnetic radiation rather than a current-carrying wire. For short, the technique was called "radio."

Since Marconi's technique made headway fastest in the United States, which was by now the most advanced nation in the world from the technological standpoint, "radio" won out over "wireless." The world, generally, speaks of radio now, and December 12, 1901 is usually thought of as the day of "the invention of radio".

In fact, Hertzian waves have come to be called "radio waves," and the older name has dropped out of use. The entire portion of the electromagnetic spectrum from a wavelength of 1 millimeter (the upper boundary of the infrared region) to a maximum wavelength equal to the diameter of the Universe — a stretch of 100 octaves — is included in the radio-wave region.

The radio waves used for ordinary radio transmission have wavelengths of from about 190 to 5700 meters. The frequency of these radio waves is therefore from 530,000 to 1,600,000 cycles per second (or from 530 to 1600 kilocycles per second.) A "cycle per second" is now referred to as a "hertz" in honor of the scientist, so we might say that the frequency range is from 530 to 1600 kilohertz.

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Higher-frequency radio waves are used in FM, still higher-frequency in television.

As years went by, radio came into more and more common use. Methods for converting radio signals into sound waves were developed so that you could hear speech and music on radio, and not just the Morse code.

This meant that radio could be combined with ordinary telephonic communication to produce "radio-telephony." In other words, you could use the telephone to communicate with someone on a ship in mid-ocean, when you yourself were in mid-continent. Ordinary telephone wires would carry the message across land, while radio waves would carry it across the sea.

There was a catch, however. Wire-conducted electricity could produce sound that was clear as a bell (Alexander Graham, of course), but air-conducted radio waves were constantly being interfered with by the random noise we call "static" (one cause is the accumulation of a static electrical charge upon the antenna).

Bell Telephone was naturally interested in minimizing static, but in order to do that, they had to learn as much as possible about the causes of it. They assigned the task of doing so to a young engineer named Karl Guthe Jansky (1905-1950).

One of the sources of static was certainly thunderstorms, so one of the things that Jansky did was to set up a complicated aerial, consisting of numerous rods, both vertical and horizontal, which could receive from different directions. What is more, he set it up on an automobile frame equipped with wheels, so that he could turn it this way and that in order to tune in on any static he did detect.

Using this device, Jansky had no trouble detecting distant thunderstorms as crackling static.

It was not all he got, however. While he was scanning the sky, he also got a hissing sound quite different from thunderstorm crackles. He was clearly getting radio waves from the sky, radio waves that were generated neither by human beings nor thunderstorms. What's more, as he studied this hiss from day to day, it seemed to him that it was not coming from the sky generally but, for the most part, from some particular part of it. By moving his aerial system properly he could point it in a direction from which the sound was most intense — and this spot moved across the sky, rather as the Sun did.

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At first, it seemed to Jansky that the radio-wave source *was* the Sun, and if the Sun had happened to be at a high sunspot-level at the time, he would have been right.

However, the Sun was at low activity at the time, and what radio waves it emitted could not be detected by Jansky's crude apparatus. That, perhaps, was a good thing, for it turned out that Jansky was on to something bigger. At the start, his apparatus did indeed seem to be pointing toward the Sun when it was receiving the hiss at maximum intensity, but day by day Jansky found his apparatus pointing farther and farther away from the Sun.

The point from which the hiss was originating was fixed with respect to the stars, while the Sun was not (as viewed from Earth). By the spring of 1932, Jansky was quite certain that the hiss was coming from the constellation of Sagittarius. It was only because the Sun was in Sagittarius when Jansky detected the cosmic hiss that he initially confused the two.

The center of the Galaxy happens to be in the direction of Sagittarius, and what Jansky had done was to detect the radio emissions from that center. The sound came to be called the "cosmic hiss" because of this.

Jansky published his account in the December 1932 issue of *Proceedings of the Institute of Radio Engineers*, and that marks the birth of "radio astronomy."

But how could radio waves reach Earth's surface from outer space when they were reflected by the ionosphere? The ionosphere keeps radio-waves originating on Earth from moving out into space, and should keep those originating in space from moving down to Earth's surface.

It turned out that a stretch of about eleven octaves of the very shortest radio waves (called "microwaves") just beyond the infrared, were not reflected by the ionosphere. These very short radio waves could move right through the ionosphere, either from Earth into space, or from space down to Earth. This stretch of octaves is known as the "microwave window."

The microwave window encompasses radiation with wavelengths from about 10 millimeters to about 10 meters, and frequencies from 30,000,000 cycles per second (30 megahertz) to 30,000,000,000 cycles per second (30,000 megahertz).

Jansky's apparatus happened to be sensitive to a frequency just inside the lower limit of the microwave window. A little bit lower and he might not have detected the cosmic hiss.

The news of Jansky's discovery made the front page of the *New York Times* and justifiably so. With the wisdom of hindsight, we can at once see

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the importance of the microwave window. For one thing, it included seven octaves as compared to the single octave of visible light (plus a bit extra in the neighboring ultraviolet and infrared). For another, light is only useful for non-solar astronomy on clear nights, whereas microwaves would reach Earth whether the sky was cloudy or not, and for that matter they could be worked with in the daytime as well for the Sun would not obscure them.

Nevertheless, professional astronomers paid little attention. The astronomer Fred Lawrence Whipple (1906-), who had just joined the Harvard faculty, did discuss the matter with animation, but he had the advantage of being a science fiction reader.

We can't blame astronomers too much, however. After all, there was nothing much they could do about it. The instrumentation required for receiving microwaves with sufficient delicacy to be of use in astronomy simply didn't exist.

Jansky himself didn't follow up his discovery. He had other things to do, and his health was not good. He died of a heart ailment at the age of 43 and barely lived to see radio astronomy begin to stir. By a strange fatality, then, three of the key scientists in the history of radio, Maxwell, Hertz, and Jansky, each died in his 40's and did not live to see the true consequences of his work, even though each would have done so if he had lived but another decade.

Still, radio astronomy was not entirely neglected. One person, an amateur, carried on. This was Grote Reber (1911-), who had become an enthusiastic radio ham at the age of 15. While he was still a student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, he took Jansky's discovery to heart and tried to follow. For instance, he tried to bounce radio signlas off the Moon and detect the echo. (He failed, but the idea was a good one, and a decade later, the Army Signal Corps with far more equipment at its disposal was to succeed.)

In 1937, Reber built the first radio telescope in his back yard in Wheaton, Illinois. The reflector, which received the radio waves, was 9.5 meters in diameter. It was designed as a paraboloid so that it concentrated the waves it received at the detector at the focus.

In 1938, he began to receive and, for several years, he was the only radio astronomer in the world. He discovered places in the sky that emitted stronger-than-background radio waves. Such "radio stars," he found, did not coincide with any of the visible stars. (Some of Reber's radio stars were eventually identified with distant galaxies.)

Reber published his findings in 1942, and by then there was a startling

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change in the attitude of scientists toward radio astronomy.

A Scottish physicist, Robert Watson-Watt (1892-1973), had grown interested in the manner in which radio waves were reflected. It occurred to him that radio waves might be reflected by an obstacle, and the reflection detected. From the time lapse between emission and detection of reflection the distance of the obstacle could be determined and, of course, the direction from which the reflection was received would give the direction of the obstacle.

The shorter the radio waves, the more easily they would be reflected by ordinary obstacles; but if they were too short, they would not penetrate clouds, fog, and dust. Frequencies were needed that were high enough to be penetrating and yet low enough to be efficiently reflected by objects you wanted to detect. The microwave range was just suitable for the purpose and, as early as 1919, Watson-Watt had already taken out a patent in connection with radio-location by means of short radio waves.

The principle is simple, but the difficulty lies in developing instruments capable of sending out and receiving microwaves with the requisite efficiency and delicacy. By 1935, Watson-Watt had patented improvements that made it possible to follow an airplane by the radio-wave reflections it sent back. The system was called "radio detection and ranging" (to "get a range" on an object is to determine its distance). This was abbreviated to "ra. d. a. r." or "radar."

Research was continued in secrecy, and, by the fall of 1938, radar stations were in operation on the British coast. In 1940, the German air force was attacking those stations, but Hitler, in a fury over a minor bombing of Berlin by the R.A.F., ordered German planes to concentrate on London.

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They ignored the radar stations thereafter, (not quite grasping their abilities) and found themselves consistently unable to achieve surprise. In consequence, Germany lost the Battle of Britain, and the war. With all due respect to the valor of British airmen, it was radar that won the Battle of Britain. (On the other hand, American radar detected incoming Japanese planes on December 7, 1941 — but it was ignored.)

The same techniques that made radar possible, as it happened, could be used by astronomers to receive microwaves from the stars, and, for that matter, to send tight beams of microwaves to the Moon and other astronomical objects, and receive the reflections.

If anything was needed to sharpen astronomical appetites, it came in 1942, when all the British radar stations were simultaneously jammed. At first, it was suspected that the Germans had worked out a way of neutralizing radar, but that was not so at all.

It was the Sun! A giant flare had sprayed radio waves in Earth's direction and had flooded the radar receivers. *Well*, if the Sun could send out such a flood of radio waves, and if the technology for studying them now existed, astronomers could barely wait till the war was over.

Once the war ended, developments came quickly. Radio astronomy flourished, radio telescopes became more delicate, new and absolutely astonishing discoveries were made. Our knowledge of the Universe underwent a mad growth of a kind that had previously taken place only in the decades following the invention of the telescope.

But that goes beyond the present limits of discussion. Next month, we'll consider the other end of the spectrum, the portion beyond the ultraviolet, and with that, our four-essay investigation of electromagnetic radiation will be completed.

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Ross Appel writes: "I am 28, once had a little red wagon; currently living with a large black cat in a small, two-room thesaurus, overlooking a sea of words; when pressed, define occupation as carpenter/writer, though life as a virgule is strange."

The Man With the Little Red Wagon

BY
ROSS APPEL

Thinking back fourteen years, to Clearyville, the tramp is first in my mind: an overlay of images from my first, and longest, impression to what, at the end, I unwillingly came to believe he was.

"Busy doing," Mort would say when someone spoke to him. "Busy *doing*," he'd repeat, trailing off into a chirping laughter that sounded a bit like crickets.

And busy he was: dragging about his battered red wagon, its sides built up an additional two feet with a jumble of scrap wood, chicken wire, and cardboard, all of it held together by snatches of twine and a thousand bent-over nails. Puffing on a cracked corncob pipe, an old hat low on his forehead, Mort pulled his cart around Clearyville's streets at least once a day; never stopping for long, never picking up, never delivering. Mostly he looked in other people's trash. Contained in his rust-red wagon, under layers of blankets, was the mound of treasures he found. His timing was erratic, but he was sure to come around, once a day, no matter what.

Now, Mort was a mite touched, folks said, but he was a good lad, minded what was his own business, god rest his poor mother's soul, dead some forty-odd years. He lived in a basement flat in the corner hotel and bar, a rambling wooden structure long converted to a boarding house (but still called *the* hotel), with his half-sister Adele, a tall, hunched woman in her sixties with vacant eyes. She was on *the* welfare, as it was called in Clearyville, and Mort was listed as her dependent.

They were part of the village, though, and they belonged, in a way

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that no one who has not lived in one place for all his life can fully understand. Mort was seen to, looked after, by the village, with a puzzling mixture of possessiveness, wary condenscension, and resignation. The old ladies on Farrell Ave., railroad widows mostly, often came out and offered him something, cake and a cup of Postum usually, when he made his rounds. The older folk in particular seemed to consider him their responsibility.

After you lived in the village for a while, Mort no longer stood out. He was inseperable from the rhythms of life there; like the nightmist that rolled in off the river, like the hoarse noontime fire siren or the rattletrap garbage truck that picked up twice a week at dawn. The village lived half in a past composed of habits and memories, and Mort was a part of them as well.

Clearyville was quiet and somnolent in the late-morning sun when the Mule, Sam, and I arrived. From the hood of a parked '62 Chevy station wagon, rusted and dented, a cat eyed us lazily, scooting under it when it saw what was in the truck. As I turned the corner, a child regarded us suspiciously from an alley between the hotel and a delapidated carriage house, bringing a memory of Vietnamese children encountered on search and destroy missions.

The Mule, the first thing I bought after getting out of the hospital, was my black, four-wheel-drive Dodge Ramcharger, completely rigged for off-the-road travel, including winches front and back. Sam was my dog — big, black Newfoundland with some Labrador retriever thrown in. The Lab blood had elongated his snout and streamlined his body without reducing his size, and he looked mean. But Sam was a sweetheart, except for rare occasions when another person or dog was deemed *not* acceptable. In that case, the case was closed. Sam switched to nasty-mode; much rumbling and many teeth. Creatures other than human or canine he did not take seriously. I often wished I could be as sensible as he. I was the driver: Mr. Bert Hopkins, war vet, recently single, recently named in the will of a distant uncle.

After cruising the streets for half an hour, I found the house. Pulling into the short dirt driveway, I let the Mule idle and regarded my new home. It was what I had expected. Paint peeling, shutters dangling, chimney crumbling, porch sagging, etc. The uncle who'd left it to me when he heard of my injuries hadn't lived in it for forty years, and various tenants had treated it as their own, which wasn't saying much.

It wasn't that bad. The basic colonial, disregarding the side addition and the shack tacked onto that, had nice lines and was more or less plumb. With the stupid additions torn off and some work, it'd do.

I switched off the ignition, got out and limped through the high grass around the house's perimeter. The sill

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beam on the north side would have to be jacked out and replaced, and the old stone foundation relaid. The chimney would last another year or two. Sam snuffled at the heap of rotted lumber in the backyard that had been the privy and observed with interest as a stray cat came yowling out. He watched the tall grass ripple in the cat's frantic wake with his head cocked, never understanding why cats assumed the worst of him.

Completing my circuit of the building, I leaned against the truck door, thinking about what should be done first and resting my back. The pain was a reminder of the structurally important bits of steel and nylon that held me together. After a year and a half in a veteran's hospital, I was happy to have everything attached and working — which gave me a leg or two up on a lot of the guys there. Paraplegics told a lot of jokes like that, from wheelchairs and beds. In comparison, my stiff back and leg were nothing, and their residual ache was nothing in comparison to the pain when I'd been hit. Therefore, I was a lucky man. Working construction with the Army Corps of Engineers, we'd just finished a set of barracks for South Vietnamese troops when we came into some incoming. On the way out, a mortar round landed next to my jeep.

Rather than think those thoughts again, I got the key the lawyer had given me and opened the front door. A complex, musty odor spilled out. The interior was rough: trash, broken furniture, wallpaper hanging as if flayed off the walls, cracked plaster and skeletal lath — your basic abandoned house. In the kitchen, where a pipe had burst and water dripped, a pale colony of mushrooms grew. I jumped as a wail pierced the gloom and a taut figure streaked out the open door. Down the stairs, Sam came padding and gave me a look, commenting on the number, nervous disposition and plain absurdity of cats.

I rubbed his head and went back outside. I'd taken a room in a motel for two weeks, and it looked as if I'd need that time just to clear the mess away. I wasn't planning to work more than six hours a day; my doctors had warned against sudden, sustained physical exertion. Well-toned muscles kept parts of my back in alignment, and if they tired, things might slide this way and that.

There was no hurry, right? A disability check arrived every month and the house was mine, free and clear. I was working because I wanted and needed to work, to get my mind off other things. A home was a goal; I needed a goal pretty badly.

As I was unlacing the tarp over the back of the Mule to get at some tools, I heard Sam growl. There was a faint squeaking. Burnside Ave., on which the house fronted, slanted up a hill, and at the top, across its intersection with South St., a skinny kid was dragging a little red wagon. I scolded Sam,

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reminding him at length that he liked children. In Clearyville, I wanted no trouble.

It took me two weeks, a week and a half alone to clean the house out, to set up. The house had held several large families, and what they didn't want, they had left behind: dirty clothes, broken dishes and toys in particular. Shoveling the junk into a wheelbarrow, I was reminded of my archaeology class at the college I went to before I was drafted. I had found my own midden heap, layers upon layers of refuse back into the past. The dirt basement had been used at one time to house animals, then later as a convenient dump. Out front sat the fruits of my labor, five imposing mounds of garbage. I'd arrange with the local hauler to have it carted away.

In the house's side addition I knocked out the dividing wall to make it one big room, for a temporary shop. Next year I'd tear it down and build a proper garage. I replaced locks and deadbolts throughout the house and added one to the door leading to the addition. My tools were worth money. My father had been a carpenter, before his heart disease got too bad, and I had his equipment as well. Slapping together some shelves and a workbench, I began to set up.

I went back to the Mule's box to get my table saw and noticed Sam growling again from his station on the front porch. Following his gaze, I saw a scrawny kid, red wagon by his side, searching through a pile of my garbage. My first reaction was to ignore him and let him take what he wanted (the broken toys probably), what did I care? But it was garbage and filthy to boot, and I didn't want to get in trouble with his parents when he dragged it home. So I walked over.

Sam accompanied me, keeping so close he bumped my leg. The kid looked up; he was no kid. Though an old-fashioned, long-peaked hunter's cap shadowed his face, the days of stubble on his chin and the deep-sunk, glaring eyes made it obvious that those days were long gone. He was as short as a child though, about five three, with ragged jeans that were too big for him clinched high on his waist with a knotted cord. Though it was a warm July day, he wore a shapeless jacket that muffled his upper torso and flapped around his knees.

To one side was his battered red wagon, blankets covering its mound of contents. The tramp was determined to add to it and, when he saw me coming scrabbled more quickly through the garbage. Initially I felt sorry for him, and the sort of life he must lead, a sorry life.

"Hey, buddy," I called to him. "That's filthy stuff. If I were you, I'd—"

The hooded, glinting eyes locked on mine. "Busy," he declared flatly. "Busy doing." You would have thought it was his garbage and I was

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interrupting. With a swallowed giggle, he returned to pawing the pile.

I stopped, about five feet away, vaguely uneasy. Sam rumbled peculiarly, half whine, half threat, a sound I'd never heard him make. There was no question that the tramp was not mentally there. I hesitated. Sam bumped my leg again and growled deep in his throat. The tramp bothered him. That settled it.

"You've got enough," I said firmly. "Beat it."

He had one hand deep in the garbage, fastened onto something he wanted but didn't want me to see. A nervous tic jumped repeatedly across his face. "Busy!" he said, spitting the word.

"Yeah, I know." I walked toward him. "You're a very busy person. Do it somewhere else."

He hopped around the mound and pulled his arm out, shielding what it held with his body. Before he jammed it under his dirty coat, I caught a glimpse of a smeared, flesh-colored surface. He hissed at me and, bobbing awkwardly because one arm clamped the object to his side, ran to his wagon and dragged it, squeaking, up the street. I watched him go, perplexed, wondering what he had taken.

That evening, on the way back to the motel, I stopped off at the corner bar for a drink. Since I'd been working on the house, not a single person had come by to say hello and see what was going on. I was not interested in running for mayor, but I wanted to be on sociable terms with my neighbors, if possible. I was trying to recuperate from the wounds I'd acquired, mental and physical, and wanted no difficulties that might reopen them.

Clearyville was not keen on strangers. So the first move had to be mine. There were six people in the worn, sprawling bar when I walked in, and they fell silent and looked elsewhere when I ordered a draft. Interrupted conversation hung in the air.

"Shot of Jack Daniels along with it," I told the poker-faced bartender, my voice loud in the silence. Might as well go for broke. I tossed a twenty on the bar top. "And give these gentlemen another of whatever they're drinking."

That won me a glance and a stiff nod from his customers. A murmured discussion resumed at the end of the bar, with more looks in my direction. The barkeep threw down my change and moved his stool further down the bar. The grizzled old-timer three seats away got up slowly and shoved some money in the jukebox. A scratchy Hank Williams song began to play.

My neighbor returned to his stool, his stiff, hostile movements reminding me of a dog's, when its territory is invaded. He began staring at me.

"Ain't from around here, are yuh?"

It was a question, anyway. "No, I—"

"That big black truck yours?" He

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wasn't waiting for answers.

"Yes." I suspected where this was heading, and stifled my temper. I lived here, now.

"Pret-tee fancy."

"It gets me around." I attempted a disarming smile. No go.

"Sure as hell does. You been driving it all over town, ain't yuh."

I *had* been noticed, how nice. "I'm renovating a house on Burnside Ave."

"Now is that a fact?" He lit a stubby black cigar. "That means you're the guy I heard about who's been picking on Mort, then."

"*I* never heard of him."

"Course not." He looked at me as if I was a dangerous cretin. "What do you know? Weren't you picking on a little fella with a red wagon today?"

"Oh, that. He was going through the garbage I—"

"I don't care what he was doing!" His fist slammed the bar. "He weren't doing you no harm. You leave him be, hear?" His face stared pugnaciously into mine. "So you think you're moving in, huh? Beard, truck and all."

I refrained from mentioning that his stubble would soon qualify as a beard. Friendly, right? I had a beard; why I had a beard would be, I hoped, my ace in the hole. These guys might be spoiling for a fight, but I'd bet they were patriotic bastards. "It covers up where I got part of my jaw blown away."

The old geezer was not impressed. "Yeah? Accident?"

"Mortar round in Vietnam, if you want to call that an accident."

That required thought on his part. I was not what he thought. His jaws worked around his cigar. Finally, "Vet, huh?"

"Been out of the hospital a couple months." Cheap, but it worked.

He looked at his buddies, at the bartender, at his buddies, at the bartender. "Mike! Give 'im another round." He watched the bartender refill my glasses. "Now how the hell you come to pick Clearyville, I can't figure."

I did not tell him my opinion of the idiot war the idiot U.S. government thought it could fight. I spoke of my uncle and the house and my plans for fixing it up. One of his buddies had gone to school with my uncle. They'd wondered what had happened to him. Florida! No wonder he died. Laughter all around. After some more bantering, they resumed conversation among themselves. I'd been sniffed and found tolerable. Finishing my beer, I said good-night and they nodded in return. We'd agreed to be polite and pleasantly disregard each other, which suited me fine.

With a population of eight hundred, Clearyville supported a laundromat, an ancient Gulf station, the bar/boarding house and a general store, which also boasted a lunch counter. As my kitchen was not yet in working order (waiting for a refrigera-

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tor on order), I often had a sandwich and coffee there. The owners, a fat couple in their forties, were less standoffish than most because they appreciated my business, any business.

People in the village did actually talk to one another, but not to strangers. If you hadn't lived in the area for at least thirty years, you were a stranger. The general store served as a clearing house for local news, and the day after my conversation in the bar, it was common knowledge. In confidential tones, the owners elaborated on the central message: the village considered Mort its responsibility, I should know, and if I was going to live here, I ought not bother him. We all had our cross to bear. Let him go round with the wagon; he was a good lad, if a mite touched, if I knew what they meant. Of course, I assured them, and certainly I'd leave the poor lad be. I meant it too. Live and let live, after the army.

Living in one place for a period of time was new to me. I found the village seemed to grow larger; its mass of people resolved to individuals, acquiring a depth and personality in spite of the brief greetings that my encounters with the townsfolk were limited to. And there was one person who did become my friend: Mrs. Katruskan. I had noticed her several times before I knew her, on my way to check my mail and get a bite to eat. She was a stout woman of medium height with silver-gold hair, dressed in bright, old-fashioned clothes, often leaning on an ebony cane with an ivory handle. She seemed out of place in the town too. Our acquaintance began one morning when she called to me on the street.

"Goot morning, young man!" The greeting came unexpectedly from behind.

Turning, I saw a heavy-set woman in a yellow summer dress hurrying to catch me. With one hand she held on her head a wide, white straw hat with a purple ribbon. She stopped by my side and leaned on her cane.

"I have off-ten observed you making your way to the store. I too am going there. You are a new addition to our modest community, perhaps!" She smiled a small smile and nodded, as if to encourage me to speak. Her English was good, but with a mixture of Slavic, German and British overtones.

Head tilted to one side, she listened attentively to my reply. I estimated her to be in her sixties, though her intent blue eyes contrasted the age of her body and broad, wrinkled face.

"So, *ja*," she said immediately after I finished, and tapped her cane on the sidewalk. "I am on my way to have a coffee. Come. We will talk a little."

"OK, sure." Her abrupt, friendly manner baffled me, so unlike what I had encountered in the town or in the hospital.

Balancing her weight on a rickety lunch-counter stool, she insisted on ordering a coffee for me, then talked. I was intrigued. She was one of those unself-conscious people who, by the

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force of their personality and experience, could talk non-stop and remain interesting. "My name is Ilse Katruskan. My husband and I came to this country after the war, the Second World War. He lost a leg in the Resistance. We had some money saved and could tolerate Europe no longer."

The coffee arrived, served with disapproval by the owner's wife. My experience was that she did not approve of conversation (excepting gossip of course) or much else. Mrs. Katruskan poured a horrifying amount of sugar in her coffee, then sipped it daintily. She shook her head.

"Vienna this is not, that I can tell you. In twenty-two years in America I have not yet become accustomed to your coffee." She took another sip and looked the owner's wife square in the eye. "Barbara, the English muffin, please."

I was still trying to place her. "Were you from Russia, Mrs. Katruskan?"

"Ilse. You will call me Ilse, please. This is a democratic country, or so we are told. No, to answer your question. I was born in Estonia, but taught for many years at the university at Dubrovnik, where German was the scientific language. My husband, Jean, was French, a professor of chemistry. After the war, two years in Vienna and one in London." She gave me a humorous sidewise glance. "So, you see, it is hard to put a finger on me."

The muffin arrived. Mrs. Katruskan (I had trouble thinking of her as Ilse) buttered it energetically. "Barbara, more butter please. There is no famine here." Barbara brought another slab. I had the feeling she had tangled with Mrs. Katruskan on this matter before, and lost.

"So," Mrs. Katruskan continued, "my husband and I purchased a fine building in Brooklyn, New York City. He taught at the City College, and the museums were happy to send me work. In summer, we would go to the country. We purchased a second house in Clearyville for very reasonable. When my husband died, I was unable to keep both. The city house I sold, and moved here. My studio is the downstairs." She took a large bite of the English muffin, and another tiny sip of coffee. "You are then a carpenter? I have need of a larger window for my work. The natural light is most important, and my eyes are not as they once were."

I declined her offer of work, explaining I was recupreating from injuries received in the Vietnam War.

"War." Mrs. Katruskan's voice was touched with contempt. "It is despicable what human beings are capable of doing to one another." She tossed her head vehemently and ground her muffin. "I killed six Nazis, when I was in the Resistance. They were disgusting, but it was not less disgusting to kill them." She mulled over her past, then regarded me directly. "Your name was again?"

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"Bert Hopkins."

"Which is the diminuitive for Bertrand, no?"

I admitted my full name was Bertrand.

A decisive nod. "I will call you Bertrand. A fine name, like the British philosopher." She finished her coffee and set the cup down sharply. "I must go. Out of the kiln I must take the vase. Perhaps you will come to dinner? I will prepare pirogi. I am an excellent cook; you will like it. Tomorrow night?"

"Sure." I found myself warming to this impetuous old lady. In the confines of a hospital you discover the need for human contact. "Around six OK?"

"Ha." Mrs. Katruskan suddenly looked shy, which was so unexpected I nearly laughed. "I am sorry. Your wife is invited as well, or course."

The near-laugh crumbled. "I'm not married."

"A fine handsome man like you, not married. I do not believe it."

Her direct manner somehow encouraged a direct answer. "I was engaged. While I was in the Saigon hospital, I found out she'd moved away to a commune in Oregon. From her girlfriend — I never even got a dear Bert letter."

"Na, do not blame her; it is the war that is to blame." Mrs. Katruskan clapped me lightly on the shoulder. "And so much the better for me. A handsome young man will now pay attention to a foolish old woman." She counted out the change for our bill and, with a sharp glance at Barbara, added a quarter tip. "I must go or my piece will fracture and the museum will be most unhappy. Tomorrow I expect you. Good-bye." Climbing ponderously off her stool, she picked up her cane, adjusted her hat and made her way determinedly out the door, never looking back.

The owner's wife shook her head disapprovingly at the broad retreating back, before turning the page in her true-romance magazine.

I, on the other hand, approved. It seemed I had met a fellow expatriate and, in a surprising way, veteran.

As the months passed, the house visibly improved. I gutted the interior, ran new wiring and plumbing, insulated the walls and sheetrocked them. I deliberated on the color scheme, with advice from Mrs. Katruskan. The floors I sanded and polyurethaned, and at local auctions I bought some comfortable furniture. Where and how I lived became important to me again.

The previous years had been bad: the war, the mortar round, my father dying shortly before, the pain, my fiance balling it up out West, and a year spent looking at walls and wheelchairs. At the end, there'd been nothing to believe in, nothing I wanted to believe in. I was a paper cut-out pasted on a three-dimensional world. Sam made it

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a little better, but it wasn't until I had a place to be and someone to talk to that I felt it might work out, after all.

Mrs. Katruskan and I became close. We had an informal arrangement: she made several meals a week for me, and in return I chauffeured her around a bit. She delighted in the Mule, to the point of once insisting I take it off the road. As we jounced down a dry stream bed, she held onto her hat and grinned approvingly. Sam pronounced her all right and complemented her on her leftovers.

Mrs. Katruskan, the redoubtable Mrs. K, was a remarkable woman for her age, for any age. She was in fact seventy-eight; my initial estimate had been off by fifteen years. And despite her age, her talkativeness, and her many strong opinions, I discovered she also knew how to listen. Frequently I was surprised to find myself talking about the effects of the war, the feelings of disillusion and pointlessness. She understood, she had been, as she was not adverse to reminding me, through two wars herself, both more extensive than mine. She lent a new perspective on my experiences, and it was refreshing to be told I was "ridiculously young to be so morose, with life yet ahead!"

Her means of support was unusual, to say the least. She was a leading authority on old porcelains and glazes. Museums and private collectors sent her a steady stream of pieces to repair or recreate. The ground floor of her house, excepting the kitchen and dining area, served as her studio and was crammed with work tables, potter's wheels, burlap, rubber molds, hundreds of oddly shaped tools, and 50-lb. bags, of clay, feldspar, ground quartz and minerals and tints in varied hues. A huge gas kiln was vented into the fireplace; a smaller electric one reposed in a corner. In the backyard was a wood-fired kiln, needed because, Mrs. Katruskan told me proudly, she was the only person in the United States who could *accurately* recreate the eggshell procelain of the K'ang-shi period of China. Her husband had assisted in the chemical analysis.

These things she told me as we sat and ate in the dining room, on dishes of Mrs. Katruskan's own design and manufacture. The room was sealed from the dust of the studio by a weather-stripped door. I enjoyed those long discursive evenings, in a house that was shaped to its owner's life.

There were two flaws to that autumn: my inability to sleep well, and the problem of petty vandalism. I'd never been a sound sleeper, but a low-grade back pain and a series of disquieting dreams made it more difficult. The vandalism, though minor, was infuriating. Panes of glass in my windows were broken; I'd hear the shards fall but not in time to nab the culprit. I began to wait up with the lights off and did almost catch him. The tactics changed: my truck taillights were repeatedly smashed, and because the

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thin red plastic broke with little sound, I never knew it till the next morning. I tried leaving Sam out to scare off the intruder, and there was no breakage on those nights, but I'd find him, miserable and huddled like a puppy, at the backdoor. After that, I let him stay in. Reporting the incidents to the police proved to be useless.

Finally, after replacing the lenses for the sixth time (at $23.50 a shot), I grew angry enough to make a concerted effort to catch whoever was responsible. I had my suspicions. I napped in the afternoon, and in the early evening I put a sleeping bag in the back of the Mule. Around eleven, feeling silly sneaking about on my own property, I climbed in after it and arranged the tarp loosely over me. I did this on several nights — falling into a light doze, awakening at sporadic sounds, a car braking, cat fight — with no results. But at 3:34 of the fourth night, according to the luminescent hands of my watch, an irregular squeaking woke me. It halted and I closed my eyes. Then footsteps began. The truck shook slightly under the force of a muffled impact.

Grabbing my flashlight, the tarp around me like a shroud, I leapt up and switched on the light. It was Mort, as I suspected. I'd let him go through my garbage and tried to accept him as part of the village's odd and reticent character, but he'd taken a dislike to me since I'd chased him off. Now, gobbling in his throat, the tramp was backing up from me, step by step, an old hammer in his hand. He must have thought me a specter, but when I tore off the tarp and he recognized who I was, he stood his ground, grinning meanly. I vaulted over the side of the Mule, yelling. In response he deliberately and slowly spat at me. That unleashed my temper, which I had kept in check since coming to Clearyville.

I sprinted over, got hold of his grimy jacket with both hands and hoisted him in the air. Shaking him vigorously, I told him if I ever found him near my property again I'd kick his fucking head in. He spat in my face and, half in fury, half in instinctive recoil, I threw him down, hard, on his wagon. He grazed its far side, tipping it with a crash. As he went sprawling on the road, Mort grew frantic and rushed back to his wagon, its wheels spinning and complaining in the still night air. I picked up my flashlight. With a headlong dive, he flung himself over the wagon, in an effort to hide and hold what had spilled out. He did not quite succeed.

Further down the road came a clicking sound. Swinging the flashlight beam to it, I saw two doll heads rolling down the road's slope, their eyes blankly opening and closing as they turned over and over. The faces were smeared with lipstick and crayon, the original mild features terribly distorted. Mort uttered a little scream of rage as he saw them go. He stuffed what he had picked up under a blanket and

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went scuttling after them.

Sam was barking in the house. I felt nauseous; I'd pulled my back lifting the tramp up. My image of him was altered, he was not only half-witted, he was living in some demented world of his own devising. I stumbled back into the house, in pain, but satisfied. After that night, I was sure he'd leave me alone.

The next evening I had a visit from the village constable. About eight o'clock, he nosed his second-hand state police cruiser up behind the Mule and sat there, with it idling. Eventually he got out and knocked on my door. He was an old Irish guy who worked as a hospital orderly during the day. I invited him in. He appeared nervous and attempted to conceal it by being officious. Refusing a seat, he fumbled in his hip pocket and came out with a little pad.

He consulted the first page, then addressed me. "There's been a report of some trouble here last night, Mr. Hopkins, between you and Mort."

"Damn straight."

He drew himself up. "Now, lad, we can't go having that sort of thing here in Clearyville. It's been explained to you that Mort is a child in mind—"

I interrupted and told the story, starting and ending with how I'd told him about my broken taillights more than once.

It had no impact. The constable listened without expression, then said: "That may be, that may be. But allowances have to be made, Mr. Hopkins, and it would be a wise thing if—"

"Suppose I go out and trash your car," I suggested nastily. "Right now." I couldn't understand why he sided with Mort, and was growing angry. "And spit in your face. What kind of allowances are you going to make?"

His lips tightened and he surveyed my living room. "You know, Mr. Hopkins, Mort lived in this house as a boy. You have to understand, being the kind of lad he is, he's upset by all the changes you're making."

In my house? I was startled, but my anger took over. "I want him off my property, permanently. Do you want me to file charges?"

"No." He pulled out a handerkerchief and wiped his brow. It occurred to me then that he might be caught in the middle. He had to live in the village, too. "I'll speak to Mort but, in the meantime, let him alone." He stopped with his hand on the doorknob, thinking. "What I'm trying to tell you, sir, is to let that boy be, or you may end up leaving like your uncle did."

He yanked the door shut and drove off, scattering gravel.

Sam died, that night.

I found him in the morning, a big sodden heap of black in the middle of the driveway, teeth fixed in a snarl. Running my hand through his ice coat, I cried — seven-thirty on a bright Thursday. He'd been restless last night, and

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when I wouldn't let him sleep on the bed, he wanted to go out. Now he was dead.

There wasn't a mark on him. He was seven years old and had been healthy since I got him. A dull fury began inside me. I didn't know what to think or, rather, I knew what I didn't want to think. He had not just died.

Running back into the house, I got the rug he slept on and put him on it in the Mule and drove recklessly to the vet's, where I dragged him away from breakfast and insisted he perform an immediate autopsy. He found nothing. Trying to calm me, he talked as he cut, about how it wasn't unusual for larger dogs like Newfies or Great Danes to die early, because of the strain their larger size put on the major organs. He was quite reasonable and concerned, but I didn't believe a word.

I brought the body back and buried Sam under a rosebush where he'd lain in the summer heat. The remainder of the afternoon I broke down and reassembled the semi-automatic shotgun I'd inherited from my father, over and over, oiling and checking the action. My back was a mass of pain, its condition deteriorating from the tension and physical shocks of the last few days. I was angry, but my thoughts refused to focus.

I was due for dinner at Mrs. Katruskan's. One look at my face, and she shepherded me into the dining room and poured me a glass of schnapps. I began to try to tell her what had happened.

"No," she said firmly. "You will tell me after you have eaten."

Dumbly, I ate what she put before me, until I couldn't.

Mrs. Katruskan poured another schnapps from the bottle she had brought to the table. "Now, explain."

I tried, but I didn't know exactly. She put down the knife and fork she'd been using to devour the ham and stared at me gravely. As I mumbled to a finish, she sighed.

"Again ... so it begins. I am not certain...." She trailed off, looking older. She drew a deep breath as she pushed her plate away. "I have need for a coffee."

Her reaction evoked apprehension in me and I strove to conceal it. "He was just a dog." My voice sounded tinny and unnatural to me. For no reason, I had a mental image of dolls heads rolling down the street. I exploded: "I'd kill that bastard, if I knew he did it." I sank into my seat. "He's retarded. Why is everyone so careful? I don't understand."

"Perhaps you will." She stood up. "Eat a little more. I will prepare coffee."

Rattling around in the kitchen, she muttered to herself in some Slavic tongue and slammed the pots more than necessary. Eventually she brought out two steaming cups of espresso. Pushing one to me, she sat down and drank hers in a single gulp, the way a serious drinker might down a whiskey.

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From her apron she brought out a black cigarette and lit it. Her expression was fierce.

"I am an old woman, Bertrand, and not in the best of health, but in my life I have seen much. As a child I lived in a village, smaller even than here, and far back in the mountains. Perhaps that is why I remain here. There are familiar things."

She exhaled, a long stream of smoke through her teeth. I could not follow her direction.

"You are young and strong, even if you have been through a bad time. Wounds heal. And you have intelligence as well, but right now you have no beliefs to sustain you, in a matter of this nature." Her eyes looked into the coiling smoke. "Man choses what he will believe and the rest ... he ignores."

I grew impatient with comments about beliefs. "That may or may not be true, but what does it have to do with Mort?"

"Ach! Everything." She flicked the cigarette at the ashtray. "It is a matter of knowing what to believe."

There was an uncomfortable silence. I was at a loss to understand her words and, at a deeper level, how events shifted so rapidly in significance. My fight with the tramp became ominous, because I did not know why. And because of that I did not know what not to believe. Or what to say.

She spoke, finally. "A religious woman I am not, that you know, and in turn you have told me that you are an atheist. A healthy attitude, ja, but so absolute. It admits no error. Do you truly believe, for yourself, we are nothing but chemicals? There is no soul, no mystery; you are sure?"

I shrugged, embarrassed by her intensity. "Who knows?" It was, in its own way, the most truthful answer I could make.

"So." She stubbed the cigarette out. "That is not satisfactory. Come, I will show you something, a thing no one has seen in a long time. Upstairs."

I had never been on the second floor. Her bedroom was small and spare in contrast to the downstairs sprawl. Scrubbed pine floors, lace curtains on two dormer windows, an intricately knitted white quilt on a low bed, a few books and a lamp on the nightstand. In one corner was a massive old armoire that must have been brought up in pieces and reassembled. Mrs. Katruskan hesitated before it.

"Now you will think me foolish." She shrugged and threw open the door. "Look."

Inside, row upon row of antique dolls sat in perfect array on the dark, burnished shelves. In the dimness of the room, the ranks of faces — with their mild expressions of childhood innocence and indifference — seemed disembodied, as if with the slightest breath of air they might come floating out.

"Dolls," I half laughed, softly. *Dolls?*

"Bisque and porcelain in fine bits of

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clothing. For many years after I lost my first child, I found and restored them. Find the center doll."

I did, and jerked, involuntarily. In the midst of the dreaming faces was Mort, was the doll in his image: jet eyes set in the harsh lines and hollows of his face, a malevolent scowl under the low hunter's cap. The figure, tense and hovering, disturbed me more than the actual tramp ever had.

Mrs. Katruskan laughed to herself. "And that is why I have lived to a ripe old age in Clearyville. From my childhood and its demons I know, he cannot have my soul while I have his image."

She saw me step back. "You must take it with you. I will make another."

When I got home, I had trouble falling asleep. The remainder of the evening with Mrs. Katruskan had been awkward. She had absolutely insisted that I take the doll with me, bustling about the studio and wrapping it with newspaper and putting it in a cardboard carton. My thoughts were in a quandry; I hadn't realized how highly I'd come to think of the old woman in the past months, and that made it difficult to dismiss her notions. For her part, as she pressed the packed box in my hands, she kept repeating that I must remember she had been a university professor and that I must not think of her as a superstitious peasant woman.

I did not sleep well, when I did finally sleep. The air was heavy. A recurrent dream came and went — the one I'd had before — so fluidly that I seemed to dream it even when I was half-awake. I was on my back, looking up, other people pressing around me, in silence. A low gray horizon hung directly over me. My head could not be moved nor my eyes closed to avoid it, and my body was numb, paralyzed as if it wasn't there, as if I were a quadriplegic. The coarse gray came closer and lower, suffocating me in its weave. In the distance, huge crickets were laughing.

I dreamed Sam woke me, lumbering up on the bed. Ordinarily I would not allow it, but that night I welcomed his warm black body. He curled up as best he could at the foot of the mattress and rested his big devoted head on my leg. I felt better and fell into an exhausted, dreamless slumber.

The next morning I spent in bed, concerned about a familiar stabbing pain in my lower back. When I got up and went to check the mail around noon, I discovered I had contracted leprosy, or the bubonic plague, as well, if the townfolk's attitudes were any indication. Clearly, they did not like their little ragpicker picked on. Tough shit, I told them, silently. I hadn't started it.

In the late afternoon, Mrs. Katruskan called and informed me she was coming over. She knocked on the door

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about seven, and entered with another large cardboard box. I groaned to myself.

"Na, it is only a *Torte*, a gift, because of last night." She seated herself at the kitchen table and looked around. "The house is coming well. What is your reaction to last night, Bertrand?"

In the box, I found an elaborate cake. "I'll put up some coffee and we can sample your masterpiece."

"Good." She examined my face during my nonanswer and then asked, as I was measuring out the grind, if I'd slept well. I put down the scoop.

"No, and how did you know?"

Her smile was thin. I noticed again that she looked older. "You are not the first to have this problem, you know. Finish what you are doing and I will explain the rest. That is why I have come." Her eyes narrowed as I sat carefully back down. "Your wounds are bothering you."

"It flares up now and then."

"So." Her lips compressed further. "You are not safe yet. You disbelieve the wrong things."

"Ilse. No bogeyman is going to steal my soul." I dropped my hands on the table in exasperation. The idea was ludicrous, and so was the part of me that felt like a child in the dark, having trouble being brave.

She passed a hand over her face. "It is not so simple. Did you not step back when you saw his image? And have you not slept badly, a dream of suffocation and blankets?"

Blankets? With a chill, I realized what the gray horizon had been. "I've had bad dreams before," I said quickly.

"So stubborn." She shook her head. "Like Jean. But I want for you to know what there is here, what the village believes. Get the coffee."

Over coffee and cake, she gave me a lucid history of Clearyville.

Mort was an abomination, she began, plunging right in, born of an incestuous relationship. The woman with whom he shared his basement flat was indeed his sister but his mother as well. Mort's father had lost his wife from tuberculosis, and Adele, the oldest daughter, had taken her place, in all senses of the word. She gave birth to Mort, and by the time he was four or five, it was clear he was retarded.

That was not as unusual as might be thought in a backwater town at the turn of the century, but in time Clearyville noticed Mort Herkel was different in other ways. People he did not like had a way of dying off. First the father, competition for Adele's affections, then two children who'd roughed him up after a kickball game, a woman next door who had spanked him for chasing her cat, and the village constable investigating the deaths. The town took justice in its own hands and tried to kill him, quietly. The three would-be assassins were found dead without a mark on them. Switching to

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appeasement, the town let him do as he wanted. He made his rounds with his red wagon, went through people's garbage, and haunted the streets where people died. Nothing could be proved, but it became accepted over time that Mort was a collector of souls and that he would not steal them from the living, if he was not interfered with. The town insured that; the occasional newcomers either left, died, or learned to let him be.

"As you," Ilse finished, "my husband and I did not believe. The tramp made the most horrible faces and kocked over our garbage. Finally my husband shot him with the air gun, to scare him away, the way he did with the squirrels at the birdfeeder. One month later he was dead, and I was in the hospital in New York, where I recovered. But when I returned, I remembered my childhood, and because I was skilled in such things, I was able to make the doll in his image. When the sickness returned, I let him see it and have been left alone since. Now I am worried for you. You will not be left alone unless you let him know you have the image."

"No." I would not be drawn into another nightmare.

We argued, with no result. I was obstinate and she was unshakable. The words were exhausted, and we sat, the only sound the clinking of our coffee cups. Embarrassed by my unreasonableness, I said I'd think about it. Then, before we argued more, I suggested we go to the movies. We could just make the second showing.

"Ja." Mrs. Katruskan's laugh was surprising. "Und I hope it is a comedy." She took an almost childlike delight in moving pictures, but that did not explain her reaction. I did not ask why she laughed.

We bundled up — it had been a cold fall so far — and left. I scraped the frost off the windshield as she got into the Mule. As I started the engine and put the truck in reverse, a white glow was reflected in the rear-view mirror. The taillights had been broken, again. I made myself ignore that, but as I shifted around to back the truck out the driveway, a face leered at me through the rear window; my own face, illuminated by the white glare. In the rime a crude but talented likeness had been etched, and over each eye was a razor-thin X.

"Wipe that away!" Mrs. Katruskan glowered and began cursing in Serbo-Croatian or whatever it was. I jumped out and scraped the frost off.

As I got back in, she stared at me without expression, then said, in a low voice, "You see?"

Most of the next day passed in a blur. Despite the condition of my back, I worked hard ripping out a closet upstairs, trying to divert the nervous energy I felt. Angered by the slow progress I was making with hammer and crowbar, I broke it down with my 16-lb. sledge.

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After a late lunch, I went out back with a can of beer and sat down on the grass by Sam's grave. In the bare patch of earth, a few small weeds had sprouted. I pulled them out. It was another bright day. My thoughts refused to come together, but I recognized a lot had been left undone. Making a face, I stood up, responding to a sudden need to resolve past events. There was only one person who could help.

I knocked on Mrs. Katruskan's door, but the house was silent, the curtains drawn. The door was locked, and she seldom locked her house. Going around back, I found the rear entrance also blocked and became concerned, doubting she would have left without mentioning it to me. I rattled the doorknob and called her name, but the sounds dispersed without response. I debated leaving, but the mute, desolate atmosphere enveloping the yard decided me. Under the porch, the garbage cans had fallen over. Putting my shoulder to the rear door, I pushed. It yielded an inch. I drew back and slammed into it, bursting into the kitchen. A smell of burnt coffee issued from the molten percolator over the lit gas burner. I ran through the dining room, into the studio; it was disorganized and empty. Upstairs, the bed was unmade and empty. Slowly I came down the stairs and stood pensively in the hallway. There was a faint scraping in the studio, I thought. Searching more thoroughly, I found her, collapsed on the floor between two workbenches, wearing a smock embroidered with yellow roses. Inches past her hand was a figure of soft clay, its features recognizably those of the tramp, though flattened by the fall. Rolling the body over, I felt for a pulse. It was there, steady but weak. Her eyelids fluttered at my touch.

"Old, too slow ... for him." Her voice was a rough whisper. Her eyes widened and she struggled up, then slumped, unconscious.

Then I understood, that in giving me the doll she had left herself open to attack. She had to be moved. Somehow I managed to carry her to the truck parked out front. As we drove to the hospital, she stirred occasionally and muttered incomprehensible oaths. I lost her in the emergency room as the machinery of the medical establishment took over. I wanted her transferred to a hospital in New York, far away. Who was I, they wanted to know. Not next of kin, could they contact next of kin? She would receive the best possible care here, don't worry, it's in the doctors' hands now, they will make the decision to move her, sir, if necessary, please calm down. My ranting and raving came to nothing. A doctor appeared and told me her condition had been stabilized, there was nothing I could do, why didn't I get some rest?

They took my phone number, big deal.

The Mule and I drove around for a while, until we ended up back at the

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house. Inside, I broke down and reassembled my shotgun, until I threw it across the room. That was no answer. Sam's death and Ilse's illness were shredding the cocoon of disbelief I had spun. They were being taken from me, and I had cared for them.

I went to the shop and found an Xacto knife. I put in a new blade and, bringing it back, meticulously and thoroughly cut apart the cardboard box Ilse had given to me. In it, of course, held upright by crumpled paper, was Mort's scowling doll. I sat down in a chair and stared at it.

Another dream-infested night was impossible, I knew; dangerous for me and probably fatal for Ilse. I did not believe that Mort was what the townsfolk made him out to be, but I could no longer simply not believe. Sam had died without a mark on him.

In the back of the Mule was a spare can of gasoline. I was pretty sure I knew where Mort kept his little red wagon, in that crumbling carriage house near to his basement apartment in the hotel. The barn door was fastened by a heavy padlock. By flashlight, I inspected the Mule's front winch and tightened a bolt that had come loose. In the kitchen, I made a big spaghetti dinner, with a chuck steak and a salad on the side, and forced myself to eat it. I watched TV for an hour, then went and found my old army peacoat, gathered what I thought I would need, and put it in the cab. I drove to the bar and parked a little ways away.

As I walked into the bar, the quiet was deafening. I dumped some change in the jukebox and sat down at the far end of the counter. The bartender grudgingly served me a double shot and a draft, but when I mentioned I might be leaving town, everyone cheered up. Boy, was I popular. I kept drinking and playing the jukebox, making it clear I planned to spend the night getting bombed. There were to be no suspicions. I spilled a lot of the liquor into the urinal, counting on the big meal to absorb the rest and keep me reasonably sober. The bar closed at two and I walked home, weaving, as if I'd forgotten the truck. Back in the kitchen I had three cups of coffee. I was mildly drunk, enough to ease my back pain and my jitters.

About three-thirty I walked quietly back to the truck, released the winch, and unrolled the cable till it reached the carriage house in front of which I was parked. The cable's hook I attached to the padlock. The front winch, operated off the battery, ripped the lock and hasp right out of the rotten wood with scarcely a sound. The barn door, unhindered, swung slowly open. Taking the gas can and a heavy-duty flashlight, I approached the yawning doorway. For reassurance I patted the bulge in the peacoat's inner pocket.

The carriage house seemed to swallow the light from the flashlight, at first. Dusty straw covered the floor; beams ran across the ceiling and vanished in the darkness; shrouded piles of

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old machinery were everywhere. After poking and prying, I found the red wagon in a distant corner, under a huge tattered quilt. I hefted the gas can and hesitated. I wanted to know.

Peeling off the quilt, I took a deep breath, then ripped off the remaining blankets. In the beam of the flashlight was a hill of doll's heads that threatened to spill out of the wagon. Their eyes were shut and, like the hoarfrost face on my pickup window, X's were slashed over the lids and sockets. Each face had been smeared with crayon, paint, or lipstick, in an attempt to give it a particular character. Saw marks could be seen where the heads had been clumsily separated from their bodies. The pile included a number of toy animals, and near the top was a rubber poodle, the type a kid might take into the bathtub, coated with black grease. Sam had died without a mark on him.

In revulsion I lifted the gas can, then froze. Two by two, with faint clicking noises, the doll's eyes were opening. In the shaky beam of the flashlight they seemed somehow alive and aware, light and the reflection of light imprisoned in the shiny, glazed irises like subterranean thoughts. One head with a crayoned black goatee looked right at me, and I knew that had been Ilse's husband. No doll near the top had silver-gold hair; Ilse had not yet been taken. I threw gasoline over all of them, poor souls.

A shuffle in the darkness caused me to whirl around. The flashlight picked out Mort, coming through the door. He had sensed my coming. Venomous, his eyes sought mine.

"Busy...." he said in a low, dangerous voice, accusing me.

Pain ripped through my body, worse than the mortar shrapnel in Nam. He raised a shape into the light — a doll's head with a brown shoe-polish beard. Its blank eyes, and his, bored into mine. My vision faltered and I found myself looking at myself, a horrible double vision in two sets of eyes, mine and the doll's. As the torture in my body swelled to numbness, I felt the world fade. A giant hand was cupped around my head, squeezing. Mort laughed, like crickets.

I tensed. For the first time in my life I was thankful for what I had gone through in Nam. I remembered the pain, and how you overcame it — not by believing or disbelieving, for it could not be denied, but by disregarding it, believing it unimportant. In halts and starts, I forced my hand to the inside of the peacoat and drew out Ilse's gift.

"Look!" I hissed through a mouth that didn't want to move, in a voice that could have been Mort's. "Look!"

In the penumbra of flashlight, Mort swayed like a hypnotized snake. I shook the doll, and he made a wet, throaty sound. He stretched a hand out, to his image. "I..." he began, but the strange word guttered in his throat.

I threw the doll onto the wagon and fumbled numbly for the matches,

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Mort staggering toward me as if half-blind. I got them out of my pocket and managed to strike one and touch it to the wagon. A gout of flame engulfed its form and its unblinking cargo. Mort's mouth was wide in a soundless scream. Hastily I unscrewed the gas cap and flung the can at the fire. As I fled the carriage house, shoving Mort aside, I heard a booming roar as it exploded.

Outside, through the town, a strong wind gusted. Above the roar of the inferno, shutters banged and tree limbs groaned and, above, a din of voices was streaming away and, amid them, a faint barking. The wind slowly ebbed.

Lights went on, people stood in their doorways in their nightclothes but made no move toward me. A siren began to keen hoarsely. It was a clear night. I jumped into the Mule and drove back to the hospital, where I slept in the waiting room. In the morning, Ilse was out of trouble.

That is what happened. I live in Texas these days, am married, have two daughters, and teach architecture at the university nearby. Fourteen years later, I find myself writing the story, attempting a better understanding. In all the fear and uncertainty, I learned something that night — the power of belief and disbelief. Once I could accept both, I was able to remake my life.

But what happened? A fire, the disappearance of a tramp. The rest is a matter of belief, and disbelief. The house in Clearyville is rented to a local couple, who take good care of it. Sam is buried there and, like Ilse, I couldn't ever give anything up. She died a few years ago, in her sleep, vigorous and imperious to the end.

The townsfolk are still close-mouthed, and nothing is said of the fire that burned down the carriage house and part of the hotel; no charges were ever pressed. Its origin remains a mystery, as well. It might never have happened, except that the village is changing: there are new faces, newcomers, and some of them have children, and some of the children have little red wagons, and dolls. They play, and no harm is done.

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Larry Niven ("Talisman," November 1981) is back with a colorful and inventive story about happenings at an inn and restaurant that occupy the ruins of a partially sunken castle dating back to the last days of magic...

The Lion In His Attic

BY

LARRY NIVEN

I

Before the quake it had been called Castle Minterl, but few outside Minterl remembered that. Small events drown in large ones. Atlantis itself, an entire continent, had drowned in the tectonic event that sank this small peninsula. For seventy years the seat of government had been at Beesh, and that place was called Castle Minterl. Outsiders called this drowned place Nihilil's Castle, for its last lord, if they remembered at all. Three and a fraction stories of what had been the south tower still stood above the waves. They bore a third name now: Rordray's Attic.

The sea was choppy today. Durily squinted against bright sunlight glinting off waves. Nothing of Nihilil's Castle showed beneath the froth.

The lovely golden-haired woman ceased peering over the side of the boat. She lifted her eyes to watch the south tower come toward them. She murmured into Karskon's ear, "And that's all that's left."

Thone was out of earshot, busy lowering the sails; but he might glance back. The boy was not likely to have seen a lovelier woman in his life; and as far as Thone was concerned, his passengers were seeing this place for the first time. Karskon turned to look at Durily, and was relieved. She looked interested, eager, even charmed.

But she *sounded* shaken. "It's all gone! Tapestries and banquet hall and bedrooms and the big ballroom ... the gardens ... all down there with the fishes, and not even merpeople to enjoy them ... that little knob of rock must have been Crown Hill.... Oh, Karskon, I wish you could have seen it." She shuddered, though her face still

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wore the mask of eager interest. "Maybe the riding-birds survived. Nihilil kept them on the roof."

"You couldn't have been more than ... ten? How can you remember so much?"

A shrug. "After the Torovan invasion, after we had to get out ... Mother talked incessantly about palace life. I think she got lost in the past. I don't blame her much, considering what the present was like. What she told me and what I saw myself, it's all a little mixed up after so long. I saw the traveling eye, though."

"How did that happen?"

"Mother was there when a messenger passed it to the king. She snatched it out of his hand, playfully, you know, and admired it and showed it to me. Maybe she thought he'd give it to her. He got very angry, and he was trying not to show it, and that was even more frightening. We left the palace the next day. Twelve days before the quake."

Karskon asked, "What about the other —?" But warning pressure from her hand cut him off.

Thone had finished up the sail. As the boat thumped against the stone wall, he sprang upward, onto what had been a balcony, and moored the bow line fast. A girl in her teens came from within the tower to fasten the stern line for him. She was big as Thone was big: not yet fat, but hefty, rounded of feature. Thone's sister, Karskon thought, a year or two older.

Durily, seeing no easier way out of the boat, reached hands up to them. They heaved as she jumped. Karskon passed their luggage up, leaving the cargo for others to move, and joined them.

Thone made introduction. "Sir Karskon, Lady Durily, this is Estrayle, my sister. Estrayle, they'll be our guests for a month. I'll have to tell Father. We bring red meat in trade."

The girl said, "Oh, very good! Father will love that. How was the trip?"

"Well enough. Sometimes the spells for wind just don't do anything. Then there's no telling where you wind up." To Karskon and Durily he said, "We live on this floor. These outside stairs take you right up past us. You'll be staying on the floor above. The top floor is the restaurant."

Durily asked, "And the roof?"

"It's flat. Very convenient. We raise rabbits and poultry there." Thone didn't see the look that passed across Durily's face. "Shall I show you to your rooms? And then I'll have to speak to Father."

Nihilil's Castle dated from the last days of real magic. The South Tower was a wide cylindrical structure twelve stories tall, with several rooms on each floor. In this age nobody would have tried to build anything so ambitious.

When Rordray petitioned for the right to occupy these ruins, he had already done so. Perhaps the idea amus-

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ed Minteri's new rulers. A restaurant in Nihilil's Castle! Reached only by boats! At any rate, nobody else wanted the probably haunted tower.

The restaurant was the top floor. The floor below would serve as an inn; but as custom decreed that the main meal was served at noon, it was rare for guests to stay over. Rordray and his wife and eight children lived on the third floor down.

Though "Rordray's Attic" was gaining some reputation on the mainland, the majority of Rordray's guests were fishermen. They often paid their score in fish or in smuggled wines. So it was that Thone found Rordray and Merle hauling in lines through the big kitchen window.

Even Rordray looked small next to Merle. Merle was two and a half yards tall, and rounded everywhere, with no corners and no indentations: his chin curved in one graceful sweep down to his wishbone, his torso expanded around him like a tethered balloon. There was just enough solidity, enough muscle in the fat, that none of it sagged at all.

And that was considerable muscle. The flat-topped fish they were wrestling through the window was as big as a normal man; but Merle and Rordray handled it easily. They settled the corpse on its side on the center table, and Merle asked, "Don't you wish you had an oven that size?"

"I do," said Rordray. "What is it?"

"Dwarf island-fish. See the frilly spines all over the top of the thing? Meant to be trees. Moor at an island, go ashore. When you're all settled the island dives under you, then snaps the crew up one by one while you're trying to swim. But they're magical, these fish, and with the magic dying away —"

"I'm wondering how to cook the beast."

That really wasn't Merle's department, but he was willing to advise. "Low heat in an oven, for a long time, maybe an eighth of an arc," meaning an eighth of the sun's path from horizon to horizon.

Rordray nodded. "Low heat, covered. I'll filet it first. I can fiddle up a sauce, but I'll have to see how fatty the meat is.... All right, Merle. Six meals in trade. Anyone else could have a dozen, but you —"

Merle nodded placidly. He never argued price. "I'll start now." He went through into the restaurant section, scraping the door on both sides, and Rordray turned to greet his son.

"We have guests," said Thone, "and we have red meat, and we have a bigger boat. I thought it proper to bargain for you."

"Guests, good. Red meat, good. What have you committed me to?"

"Let me tell you the way of it." Thone was not used to making business judgments in his father's name. He looked down at his hands and said, "Most of the gold you gave me, I had spent. I had spices and dried meat and

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vegetables and pickle and the rest. Then a boat pulled in with sides of ox for sale. I was wondering what I could sell, to buy some of that beef, when these two found me at the dock."

"Was it you they were looking for?"

"I think so. The lady Durily is of the old Minterl nobility, judging by her accent. Karskon speaks Minterl but he might be of the new nobility, the invaders from Torov. Odd to find them together —"

"You didn't trust them. Why did you deal with them?"

Thone smiled. "Their offer. The fame of Rordray's Attic has spread throughout Minterl, so they say. They want a place to honeymoon; they had married that same day. For two weeks' stay they offered ... well, enough to buy four sides of ox and enough left over to trade *Strandhugger* in on a larger boat, large enough for the beef and two extra passengers."

"Where are they now? And where's the beef?"

"I told ... eep. It's still aboard."

Rordray roared. "*Arilta!*"

"I meant to tell Estrayle to do something about that, but it —"

"Never mind, you've done well."

Arilta came hurrying from the restaurant area. Rordray's wife resembled her husband to some extent: big-boned, heavy, placid of disposition, carrying her weight well. "What is it?"

"Set the boys to unloading the new boat. Four sides of beef. Get those into the meatbox fast; they can take their time with the other goods."

She left, calling loudly for the boys. Rordray said, "The guests?"

"I gave them the two leeward rooms, as a suite."

"Good. Why don't you tell them dinner is being served? And then you can have your own meal."

The dining hall was a roar of voices, but when Rordray's guests apeared, the noise dropped markedly. Both were wearing court dress of a style which had not yet reached the provinces. The man was imposing in black and silver, with a figured silver patch over his right eye. The lady was eerily beautiful, dressed in flowing sea-green, and a thumb-length taller than her escort. They were conversation stoppers, and they knew it.

And here a man came hurrying to greet them, clapping his hands in delight. "Lady Durily, Lord Karskon? I am Rordray. Are your quarters comfortable? Most of the middle floor is empty; we can offer a variety of —"

"Quite comfortable, thank you," Karskon said. Rordray had taken him by surprise. Rumor said that Rordray was a were-lion. He was large, and his short reddish-blond hair might be the color of a lion's mane; but Rordray was balding on top, and smooth-shaven, and well-fed, with a round and happy face. He looked far from ferocious —

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"Rordray! Bring 'em here!"

Rordray looked around, disconcerted. "I have an empty table in the corner, but if you would prefer Merle's company...?"

The man who had called was tremendous. The huge platter before him bore an entire swordfish filet. Durily stared in what might have been awe or admiration. "Merle, by all means! And can you be persuaded to join us?"

"I would be delighted." Rordray escorted them to the huge man's table and seated them. "The swordfish is good —"

"The swordfish is *wonderful!*" Merle boomed. He'd made amazing progress with the half-swordfish while they were approaching. "It's baked with apricots and slivered nuts and ... something else, I can't tell. Rordray?"

"The nuts are soaked in a liqueur called *brosa*, from Rynildissen, and dried in the oven."

"I'll try it," Karskon said, and Durily nodded. Rordray disappeared into the kitchen.

The noise level was rising toward its previous pitch. Durily raised her voice just high enough. "Most of you seem to be fishers. It must have been hard for you after the merpeople went away."

"It was, Lady. They had to learn to catch their own fish instead of trading. All the techniques had to be invented from scratch. They tell me they tried magic at first. To breathe water, you know. Some of them drowned. Then came fishing spears, and special boats, and nets —"

"You said *they?*"

"I'm a whale," said Merle. "I came later."

"Oh. There aren't many werefolk around these days. Anywhere."

"We aren't all gone," Merle said, while Karskon smiled at how easily they had broached the subject. "The merpeople went away, all right, but it wasn't just because they're magical creatures. Their life *styles* include a lot of magic. Whales don't practice much magic."

"Even so," Karskon wondered, "what are you doing on land? Aren't you afraid you might, ah, change? Magic isn't dependable any more —"

"But Rordray is. Rordray would get me out in time. Anyway, I spend most of my time aboard *Shrimp*. See, if the change comes over me there, it's no problem. A whale's weight would swamp my little boat and leave me floating."

"I still don't see —"

"Sharks."

"Ah."

"Damn brainless toothy wandering weapons! The more you kill, the more the blood draws more till —" Merle shifted restlessly. "Anyway, there are no sharks ashore. And there are books, and people to talk to. Out on the sea there's only the whale songs. Now, I like the singing; who wouldn't? But it's only family gossip, and weather patterns, and shoreline changes, and where are the fish."

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"That sounds useful."

"Sure it is. Fisherfolk learn the whale songs to find out where the fish are. But for any kind of intelligent conversation you have to come ashore. Ah, here's Rordray."

Rordray set three plates in place, bearing generous slabs of swordfish and vegetables cooked in elaborate fashions. "What's under discussion?"

"Were-creatures," Karskon said. "They're having a terrible time of it almost everywhere."

Rordray sat down. "Even in Ryn-ildissen? The wolf-people sector?"

"Well," Durily said uncomfortably, "they're changing. You know, there are people who can change into animals, but that's because there are werefolk among their ancestors. Most werefolk are animals who learned how to take human form. The human shape has magic in it, you know." Rordray nodded, and she continued. "In places where the magic's gone, it's terrible. The animals lose their minds. Even human folk with some animal ancestry, they can't make the change, but their minds aren't quite human either. Wolf ancestry makes for good soldiers, but it's hard for them to stop. A touch of hyena or raccoon makes for thieves. A man with a touch of lion makes a good general, but —"

Merle shifted restlessly, as if the subject were painful to him. His platter was quite clean now. "Oh, to hell with the problems of werefolk. Tell me how you lost your eye."

Karskon jumped, but he answered. "Happened in the baths when I was thirteen. We were having a fight with wet towels and one of my half-brothers flicked my eye out with the corner of a towel. Dull story."

"You should make up a better one. Want some help?" Karskon shook his head, smiling despite himself. "Where are you from?"

"Inland. It's been years since I tasted fresh fish. You were right, it's wonderful." He paused, but the silence forced him to continue. "I'm half Torovan, half Minterl. Duke Chamil of Konth made me his librarian, and I teach his legitimate children. Lady Durily descends from the old Minterl nobility. She's one of Duchess Chamil's ladies-in-waiting. That's how we met."

"I never understood shoreside politics," Merle said. "There was a war, wasn't there, long ago?"

Karskon answered for fear that Durily would. "Torov invaded after the quake. It was an obvious power vacuum. The tales tell that the Torovan armies never got this far south. What was left of the dukes surrendered first. You'll find many of the old Minterls hereabouts. Torovans have to go in packs when they come here."

Merle was looking disgusted. "Whales don't play at war."

"It's not a game," Karskon said.

Rordray added, "Or at least the stakes are too high for ordinary people."

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There was murky darkness, black with a hint of green. Blocky shapes. Motion flicked past, drifted back more slowly. Too dark to see, but Karskon sensed something looking back at him. A fish? A ghost?

Karskon opened his good eye.

Durily was at the window, looking out to sea. Leftward, waves washed the spike of island that had been Crown Hill. "There was grass almost to the top," Durily said, "but the peak was always a bare knob. We picnicked there once, the whole family —"

"What else do you remember? Anything we can use?"

"Two flights of stairs," Durily said. "You've seen the one that winds up the outside of the tower, like a snake. Snake-headed, it used to be, but the quake must have knocked off the head."

"Animated?"

"No, just a big carving ... um ... it could have been animated once. The magic was going out of everything. The merpeople were all gone; the mainlanders were trying to learn to catch their own fish, and we had trouble getting food. Nihilil was thinking of moving the whole court to Beesh. Am I rambling too much, darling?"

"No telling what we can use. Keep it up."

"The inside stairs lead down from the kitchen, through the laundry room on this floor, and through Thone's room on the lower floor."

"Thone." Karskon's hand strayed to his belt buckle, which was silver, and massive; which was in fact the hilt of a concealed dagger. "He's not as big as Rordray, but I'd hate to have him angry with me. They're all too big. We'd best not be caught ... unless we, or *you*, can find a legitimate reason for being in Thone's room?"

Durily scowled. "He's just not interested. He sees me, he knows I'm a woman, but he doesn't seem to care ... or else he's very stupid about suggestions. That's possible."

"If he's part of a were-lion family —"

"He wouldn't mate with human beings?" Durily laughed, and it sounded like silver coins falling. No, he thought, she wouldn't have had trouble seducing a young man ... or *anything* male. *I* gave her no trouble. Even now, knowing the truth....

"Our host isn't a were-lion," she said. "Lions eat red meat. We've brought red meat to his table, but he was eating fish. Lions don't lust for a varied diet, and they aren't particular about what they eat. Our host has exquisite taste. If I'd known how fine a cook he is, I'd have come for that alone."

"He shows some other signs. The whole family's big, but he's a lot bigger. Why does he shave his face and clip his hair short? Is it to hide a mane?"

"Does it matter if they're lions? We don't want to be caught," Durily said.

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"Any one of them is big enough to be a threat. Stop fondling that canape sticker, dear. This trip we use stealth and magic."

Oddly reluctant, Karskon said, "Speaking of magic...?"

"Yes. It's time."

You're quite right. They're hiding something," Rordray said absently. He was carving the meat from a quarter of ox and cutting it into chunks, briskly, apparently risking his fingers at every stroke. "What of it? Don't we all have something to hide? They are my guests. They appreciate my food."

"Well," said his wife, "don't we all have something worth gossiping about? And for a honeymooning couple —"

At which point Estrayle burst into a peal of laughter.

Arilta asked, "Now what brought that on?" But Estrayle only shook her head and bent over the pale yellow roots she was cutting. Arilta turned back to her husband. "They don't seem loving enough, somehow. And she so beautiful, too."

"It makes a pattern," Rordray said. "The woman is beautiful, as you noticed. She is the Duchess's lady-in-waiting. The man serves the Duke. Could Lady Durily be the Duke's mistress? Might the Duke have married her to one of his men? It would provide for her if she's pregnant. It might keep the Duchess happy. It happens."

Arilta said, "Ah." She began dumping double handfuls of meat into a pot. Estrayle added the chopped root.

"On the other hand," Rordray said, "she is of the old Minterl aristocracy. Karskon may be too, half anyway. Perhaps they're not welcome near Beesh because of some failed plot. The people around here are of the old Minterl blood. They'd protect them, if it came to that."

"Well," his wife said with some irritation, "which is it?"

Rordray teased her with a third choice. "They spend money freely. Where does it come from? They could be involved in a theft we will presently hear about."

Estrayle looked up from cutting onions, tears dripping past a mischievous smile. "Listen for word of a large cat's-eye emerald."

"Estrayle, you will explain that!" said her mother.

Estrayle hesitated, but her father's hands had stopped moving, and he was looking up. "It was after supper," she said. "I was turning down the beds. Karskon found me. We talked a bit, and then he, well, made advances. Poor little man, he weighs less than I do. I slapped him hard enough to knock that lovely patch right off his face. Then I informed him that if he's interested in marriage he should be talking to my father, and in any case there are problems he should be aware of...." Her eyes were dancing. "I must say he took it well. He asked about my

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dowry! I hinted at undersea treasures. When I said we'd have to live here, he said at least he'd never have to worry about the cooking, but his religion permitted him only one wife, and I said what a pity —"

"The jewel," Rordray reminded her.

"Oh, it's beautiful! Deep green, with a blazing vertical line, just like a cat's eye. He wears it in the socket of his right eye."

Arilta considered. "If he thinks that's a safe place to hide it, he should get a less flamboyant patch. Someone might steal that silver thing."

"Whatever their secret, it's unlikely to disturb us," Rordray said. "And this is their old seat of royalty. Even the ghost ... which reminds me. Jarper?"

The empty air he spoke to remained empty. He said, "I haven't seen Jarper since lunch. Has anyone?"

Nobody answered. Rordray continued, "I noticed him hovering behind Karskon at lunch. Karskon must be carrying something magical. Maybe the jewel? Oh, never mind, Jarper can take care of himself. I was saying Jarper probably won't bother our guests. He's of old Minterl blood himself. If he had blood."

They stuffed wool around the door and around the windows. They propped a chair under the doorknob. Karskon and Durily had no intention of being disturbed at this point. An innkeeper who found his guests marking patterns on the floor with powdered bone, and heating almost-fresh blood over a small flame, could rightly be expected to show annoyance.

Durily spoke in a language once common to the Sorcerer's Guild, now common to nobody. The words seemed to hurt her throat, and no wonder, Karskon thought. He had doffed his silver eye patch. He tended the flame and the pot of blood, and stayed near Durily, as instructed.

He closed his good eye and saw green-tinged darkness. Something darker drifted past, slowly, something huge and rounded, that suddenly vanished with a flick of finny tail. Now a drifting current of luminescence ... congealing, somehow, to a vaguely human shape....

The night he robbed the jewel merchant's shop, this sight had almost killed him.

The Movement had wealth to buy the emerald, but Durily swore that the Torovan lords must not learn that the jewel existed. She hadn't told him why. It wasn't for the Movement that he had obeyed her. The Movement would destroy the Torovan invaders, would punish his father and his half-brothers for their arrogance, for the way they had treated him ... for the loss of his eye. But he had obeyed *her*. He was her slave in those days, the slave of his lust for the Lady Durily, his father's mistress.

He had guessed that it was *glamour* that held him: magic. It hadn't seemed

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to matter. He had invaded the jeweler's shop expecting to die, and it hadn't mattered.

The merchant had heard some sound and come to investigate. Karskon had already scooped up everything he could find of value, to distract attention from the single missing stone. Waiting for discovery in the dark cellar, he had pushed the jewel into his empty eye socket.

Greenish darkness, drifting motion, a sudden flicker that might be a fish's tail. Karskon was seeing with his missing eye.

The jeweler had found him while he was distracted, but Karskon had killed him after all. She had lost a good deal of her power over him. He had outgrown his terror of that greenish-dark place. He had seen it every night while he waited for sleep, these past two years.

Karskon opened his good eye to find that they had company. The color of fading fog, it took the wavering form of a wiry old man garbed for war, with his helmet tucked under his arm.

"I want to speak to King Nihilil," Durily said. "Fetch him."

"Your pardon, Lady." The voice was less than a whisper, clearer than a memory. "I c-can't leave here."

"Who were you?"

The fog-wisp straightened to attention. "Sergeant Jarper Sleen, serving Minterl and the King. I was on duty in the watchtower when the land th-ththrashed like an island-fish submerging. The wall broke my arm and some ribs. After things got quiet again, there were only these three floors left, and no food anywhere. I s-starved to death."

Durily examined him with a critical eye. "You seem nicely solid after seventy-six years."

The ghost smiled. "That's Rordray's doing. He lets me take the smells of his cooking as offerings. But I can't leave where I d-died."

"Was the King home that day?"

"Lady, I have to say that he was. The quake came fast. I don't doubt he drowned in his throne room."

"Drowned," Durily said thoughtfully. "All right." She poured a small flask of seawater into the blood, which was now bubbling. Something must have been added to keep it from clotting. She spoke high and fast in the Sorcerer's Guild tongue.

The ghost of Jarper Sleen sank to its knees. Karskon saw the draperies wavering as if heated air was moving there; and when he realized what that meant, he knelt too.

An unimaginative man would have seen nothing. This ghost was more imagination than substance; in fact the foggy crown had more definition, more reality, than the head beneath. Its voice was very much like a memory surfacing from the past ... not even Karskon's past, but Durily's.

"You have dared to waken Minterl's king."

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Seventy-six years after the loss of Atlantis, and the almost incidental drowning of the seat of government of Minterl, the ghost of Minterl's king seemed harmless enough. But Durily's voice quavered. "You knew me. Durily. Lady Tinylla of Beesh was my mother."

"Durily. You've grown," said the ghost. "Well, what do you want of me?"

"The barbarians of Torov have invaded Minterl."

"Have you ever been tired unto death, when the pain in an old wound keeps you awake nonetheless? Well, tell me of these invaders. If you can lure them here, I and my army will pull them under the water."

Karskon thought that Minterl's ancient king couldn't have drowned a bumblebee. Again he kept silent, while Durily said, "They invaded the year after the great quake. They have ruled Minterl for seventy-four years. The palace is drowned but for these top floors." Durily's voice became a whip. "They are used as an inn! Rabbits and chickens are kept where the fighting-birds roosted!"

The ghost-king's voice grew stronger. "Why was I not told?"

This time Karskon spoke. "We can't lure them here, to a drowned island. We must fight them where they rule, in Beesh."

"And who are you?"

"I am Karskon Lor, Your Majesty. My mother was of Beesh. My father, a Torovan calling himself a Lord, Chamil of Konth. Lord Chamil raised me to be his librarian. His legitimate sons he —" Karskon fell silent.

"You're a Torovan's bastard?"

"Yes."

"But you would strike against the Torovan invaders. How?"

Durily seemed minded to let him speak. Karskon lifted the silver eye patch to show the great green gem. "There were two of these, weren't there?"

"Yes."

"Durily tells me they were used for spying."

The King said, "What you keep in your eye socket was the traveling stone. Usually I had it mounted in a ring. If I thought a lord needed watching, I made him a present of it. If he was innocent, I made him another present and took it back."

Karskon heaved a shuddering sigh. He had *almost* believed; always he had *almost* believed.

Durily asked, "Where was the other stone?"

"Did your mother tell you of my secret suite, for times when I wanted company away from the Queen? It was a very badly kept secret. Many ladies could describe that room. Your mother was one."

"Yes."

The ghost smiled. "But it stood empty most of the time, except for the man on watch in the bathing chamber. There is a statue of the one-eyed god in

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the bathing chamber, and its eye is a cat's-eye emerald."

Durily nodded. "Can you guide us there?"

"I can. Can you breathe under water?"

Durily smiled. "Yes."

"The gem holds *mana*. If it leaves Minterl Castle, the ghosts will fade."

Durily lost her smile. "King Nihilil —"

"I will show you. Duty runs two ways between a king and his subjects. Now?"

"A day or two. We'll have to reach the stairwell, past the inkeeper's family."

The ghosts went where ghosts go. Karskon and Durily pulled the wool loose from the windows and opened them wide. A brisk sea wind whipped away the smell of scorched blood. "I wish we could have done this on the roof," she said viciously. "Among Rordray's damned chickens. Used their blood."

It happened the second day after their arrival. Karskon was expecting it.

The dining room was jammed before noon. Rordray's huge pot of stew dwindled almost to nothing. He set his older children to frying thick steaks with black pepper and cream and essence of wine, his younger children to serving. Providentially Merle showed up, and Rordray set him to moving tables and chairs to the roof. The younger children set the extra tables.

Karskon and Durily found themselves squeezing through a host of seamen to reach the roof. Rordray laughed as he apologized. "But after all, it's your own doing! I have red meat! Usually there is nothing but fish and shellfish. What do you prefer? My stew has evaporated, *poof*, but I can offer —"

Durily asked, "Is there still fish?" Rordray nodded happily and vanished.

Cages of rabbits and pigeons and large, bewildered-looking *moas* had been clustered in the center of the roof, to give the diners a sea view. A salvo of torpedoes shot from the sea: bottle-nosed mammals with a laughing expression. They acted like they were trying to get someone's attention. Merle, carrying a table and chairs, said, "Merpeople. They must be lost. Where the magic's been used up, they lose their half-human shape, and their sense too. If they're still around when I put out, I'll lead them out to sea."

Rordray served them himself, but didn't join them. Today he was too busy. Under a brilliant blue sky they ate island-fish baked with slivered nuts and some kind of liqueur, and vegetables treated with respect. They ate quickly. Butterflies fluttered in Karskon's belly, but he was jubilant.

Rordray had red meat. Of *course* the Attic was jammed, of *course* Rordray and his family were busy as a fallen beehive. The third floor would be entirely deserted.

* * *

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Water, black and stagnant, covered the sixth step down. Durily stopped before she reached it. "Come closer," she said. "Stay close to me."

Karskon's protective urge responded to her fear and her beauty. But, he reminded himself, it wasn't *his* nearness she needed; it was the gem.... He moved down to join Durily and her ally.

She arrayed her equipment on the steps. No blood this time: King Nihilil was already with them, barely, like an intrusive memory at her side.

She began to chant in the Sorcerer's Guild tongue.

The water sank, step by step. What had been done seventy-odd years ago could be undone, partially, temporarily.

Durily's voice grew deep and rusty. Karskon watched as her hair faded from golden to white, as the curves of her body drooped. Wrinkles formed on her face, her neck, her arms.

Glamour is a lesser magic, but it takes *mana*. The magic that was Durily's youth was being used to move seawater now. Karskon had thought he was ready for this. Now he found himself staring, flinching back, until Durily, without interrupting herself, snarled (teeth brown or missing) and gestured him down.

He descended the wet stone stairs. Durily followed, moving stiffly. King Nihilil floated ahead of them like foxfire on the water.

The sea had left the upper floors, but water still sluiced from the landings. Karskon's torch illuminated dripping walls, and once a stranded fish. Within his chest his heart was fighting for its freedom.

On the fifth floor down there were side corridors. Karskon, peering into their darkness, shied violently from a glimpse of motion. An eel thrashed as it drowned in air.

Eighth floor down.

Behind him, Durily moved as if her joints hurt. Her appearance repelled him. The deep lines in her face weren't smile wrinkles; they were selfishness, sulks, rage. And her voice ran on, and her hands danced in creaky curves.

She can't hurry. She'd fall. Can't leave her behind. Her spells, my jewel: keep them together, or we drown. But the ghost was drawing ahead of them. *Would he leave us? Here?* Worse, King Nihilil was becoming hard to see. Blurring. The whole corridor seemed filled with the restless fog that was the King's ghost....

No. The King's ghost had *multiplied*. A horde of irritated or curious ghosts had joined the procession. Karskon shivered from the cold and wondered how much the cold was due to ghosts rubbing up against him.

Tenth floor down ... and the procession had become a crowd. Karskon, trailing, could no longer pick out the King. But the ghosts streamed out of the stairwell, flowed away down a corridor, and Karskon followed. A murmuring was in the air, barely audible,

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a hundred ghosts whispering gibberish in his ear.

The sea had not retreated from the walls and ceiling here. Water surrounded them, ankle-deep as they walked, rounding up the corridor walls and curving over their heads to form a huge, complex bubble. Carpet disintegrated under Karskon's boots.

To his right the wall ended. Karskon looked over a stone railing, down into the water, into a drowned ballroom. There were bones at the bottom. Swamp-fires formed on the water's surface. More ghosts.

The ghosts had paused. Now they were like a swirling, continuous, glowing fog. Here and there the motion suggested features ... and Karskon suddenly realized that he was watching a riot, ghost against ghost. They'd realized why he was here. Drowning the intruders would save the jewel, save their fading lives. *Not* drowning them would repel Minterl's enemies.

Karskon nerved himself and waded into them. Hands tried to clutch him ... a broadsword-shape struck his throat and broke into mist....

He was through them, standing before a heavy, ornately carved door. The King's ghost was waiting. Silently he showed Karskon how to manipulate a complex lock. Presently he mimed turning a brass knob and threw his weight back. Karskon imitated him. The door swung open.

A bedchamber, and a canopied bed like a throne. If this place was a ruse, Nihilil must have acted his part with verve. The sea was here, pushing in against the bubble. Karskon could see a bewildered school of minnows in a corner of the chamber. The leader took a wrong turn, and the whole school whipped around to follow him, through the water interface and suddenly into the air. They flopped as they fell, splashed into more water and scattered.

A bead of sweat ran down Durily's cheek.

The King's ghost waited patiently at another door.

Terror was swelling in Karskon's throat. Fighting fear with self-directed rage, he strode soggily to the door and threw it open, before the King's warning gesture could register.

He was looking at a loaded crossbow aimed throat-high. The string had rotted and snapped. Karskon remembered to breathe, forced himself to breathe....

It was a tiled bathroom, sure enough. There was a considerable array of erotic statuary, some quite good. The Roze-Kattee statue would have been better for less detail, Karskon thought. A skeleton in the pool wore a rotting bath-attendant's kilt; that would be Nihilil's spy. The one-eyed god in a corner ... yes. The eye not covered by a patch gleamed even in this dim, watery light. Gleamed green, with a bright vertical pupil.

Karskon closed his good eye and found himself looking at himself.

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Grinning, eye closed, he moved toward the statue. Fumbling in his pouch for the chisel. Odd, to see himself coming toward himself like this. And Durily behind him, the triumph beginning to show through the exhaustion. And behind her —

He drew his sword as he spun. Durily froze in shock as he seemed to leap at her. The bubble of water trembled, the sea began to flow down the walls, before she recovered herself. But by then Karskon was past her and trying to skewer the intruder, who danced back, laughing, through the bedroom and through its orante door, while Karskon —

Karskon checked himself. The emerald in his eye socket was supplying the magical energy to run the spell that held back the water. It had to stay near Durily. She'd drilled him on this, over and over, until he could recite it in his sleep.

Rordray stood in the doorway, comfortably out of reach. He threw his arms wide, careless of the big, broad-bladed kitchen knife in one hand, and said, "But what a place to spend a honeymoon!"

"Tastes differ," Karskon said. "Innkeeper, this is none of your business."

"There is a thing of power down here. I've known that for a long time. You're here for it, aren't you?"

"The spying stone," Karskon said. "You don't even know what it is?"

"Whatever it is, I'm afraid you can't have it," Rordray said. "Perhaps you haven't considered the implications —"

"Oh, but I have. We'll sell the traveling stone to the barbarian king in Beesh. From that moment on the Movement will know everything he does."

"Can you think of any reason why I should care?"

Karskon made a sound of disgust. "So you support the Torovans!"

"I support nobody. Am I a lord, or a soldier? No, I feed people. If someone should supplant the Torovans, I will feed the new conquerors. I don't care who is at the top."

"We care."

"Who? You, because you haven't the rank of your half-brothers? The elderly Lady Durily, who wants vengeance on her enemies' grandchildren? Or the ghosts? It was a ghost who told me you were down here."

Beyond Rordray, Karskon watched faintly luminous fog swirling in the corridor. The war of ghosts continued. And Durily was tiring. He couldn't stay here, he had to pry out the jewel. He asked, "Is it the jewel you want? You couldn't have reached it without Durily's magic. If you distract her now, you'll never reach the air, with or without the jewel. We'll all drown." Karskon kept his sword's point at eye level. If Rordray was a were-lion —

But he didn't eat red meat.

"The jewel has to stay," Rordray said. "Why do you think these walls are still standing?"

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Karskon didn't answer.

"The quake that sank Atlantis, the quake that put this entire peninsula under water. Wouldn't it have shaken down stone walls? But this palace dates from the Sorcerer's Guild period. Magic spells were failing, but not always. The masons built this palace of good, solid stone. Then they had it blessed by a competent magician."

"Oh."

"Yes. The walls would have been shaken down without some source of *mana* to power it. You see the problem. Remove the talisman, the castle crumbles."

He might be right, Karskon thought. But not until both emeralds were gone, and Karskon too.

Rordray was still out of reach. He didn't handle that kitchen knife like a swordsman, and in any case it was too short to be effective. At a dead run Karskon thought he could catch the beefy chef ... but what of Durily, and the spell that held back the water?

Fool! She had the other jewel, the spying stone!

He charged.

Rordray whirled and ran down the hall. The ghost-fog swirled apart as he burst through. He was faster than he looked, but Karskon was faster still. His sword was nearly pricking Rordray's buttocks when Rordray suddenly leapt over the banister.

Karskon leaned over the dark water. The ghosts crowded around him were his only light source now.

Rordray surfaced, thirty feet above the ballroom floor and well out into the water, laughing. "Well, my guest, can you swim?"

Karskon removed his boots. He might wait, let Rordray tire himself treading water; but Durily must be tiring even faster and growing panicky as she wondered where he had gone. He couldn't leave Rordray at their backs.

He didn't dive; he lowered himself carefully into the water, then swam toward Rordray. Rordray backstroked, grinning. Karskon followed. He was a fine swimmer.

Rordray was swimming backward into a corner of the ballroom. Trapping himself. The water surface rose behind him, curving up the wall. Could Rordray swim uphill?

Rordray didn't try. He dove. Karskon dove after him, kicking, peering down. There were patches of luminosity, confusing ... and a dark shape far below ... darting away at a speed Karskon couldn't hope to match. Apalled, Karskon lunged to the surface, blinked, and saw Rordray clamber over the railing. He threw Karskon's boots at his head and dashed back toward the "secret" bedroom.

The old woman was still waiting, with the King's ghost for her companion. Rordray tapped her shoulder. He said, "Boo."

She froze, then tottered creakily around to face him. "Where is Karskon?"

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"In the ballroom."

Water was flowing down the walls, knee-high and rising. Rordray was smiling as at a secret joke, as he'd smiled while watching her savor her first bite of his incredible swordfish. It meant something different now.

Durily said, "Very well, you killed him. Now, if you want to live, get me that jewel and I will resume the spells. If we succeed, I can offer Karskon's place in the new nobility, to you or your son. Otherwise we both drown."

"Karskon could tell you why I refuse. I need the magic in the jewel to maintain my inn. With the traveling jewel Karskon brought me, this structure will remain stable for many years."

The water was chest high. "Both jewels, or we don't leave," the old woman said, and immediately resumed her spell, hands waving wildly, voice raspy with effort. She felt Rordray's hands on her body and squeaked in outrage, then in terror, as she realized he was tickling her. Then she doubled in helpless laughter.

The water walls were collapsing, flowing down. The odd, magical bubble was collapsing around him. Clawing at the stone banister, Karskon heard his air supply roaring back up the stairwell, out through the broken windows. A wave threw him over the banister, then the air was only a few silver patches on the ceiling, and the seawash was turning him over and over.

A big dark shape brushed past him, gone before his sword-arm could react. Rordray had escaped him. He swam toward one of the smashed ballroom windows, knowing he wouldn't make it, trying anyway. The faint glow ahead might be King Nihilil, guiding him. Then it all seemed to fade, and he was breathing water, strangling.

Rordray pulled himself over the top step, his flippers already altering to hands. He was gasping, blowing. It was a long trip, even for a sea lion.

The returning sea had surged up the steps and sloshed along the halls and into the rooms where Rordray and his family dwelt. Rordray shook his head. For a few days they must needs occupy the next level up: the inn, which was now empty.

The change to human form was not so great a change, for Rordray. He became aware of one last wisp of fog standing beside him.

"Well," it said, "how's the King?"

"Furious," Rordray said. "But after all, what can he do? I thank you for the warning."

"I'm glad you could stop them. My curse on their crazy rebellion. We'll all f-fade away in time, I guess, with the magic dwindling and dwindling. But not just yet, if you please!"

"War is bad for everyone," said Rordray.

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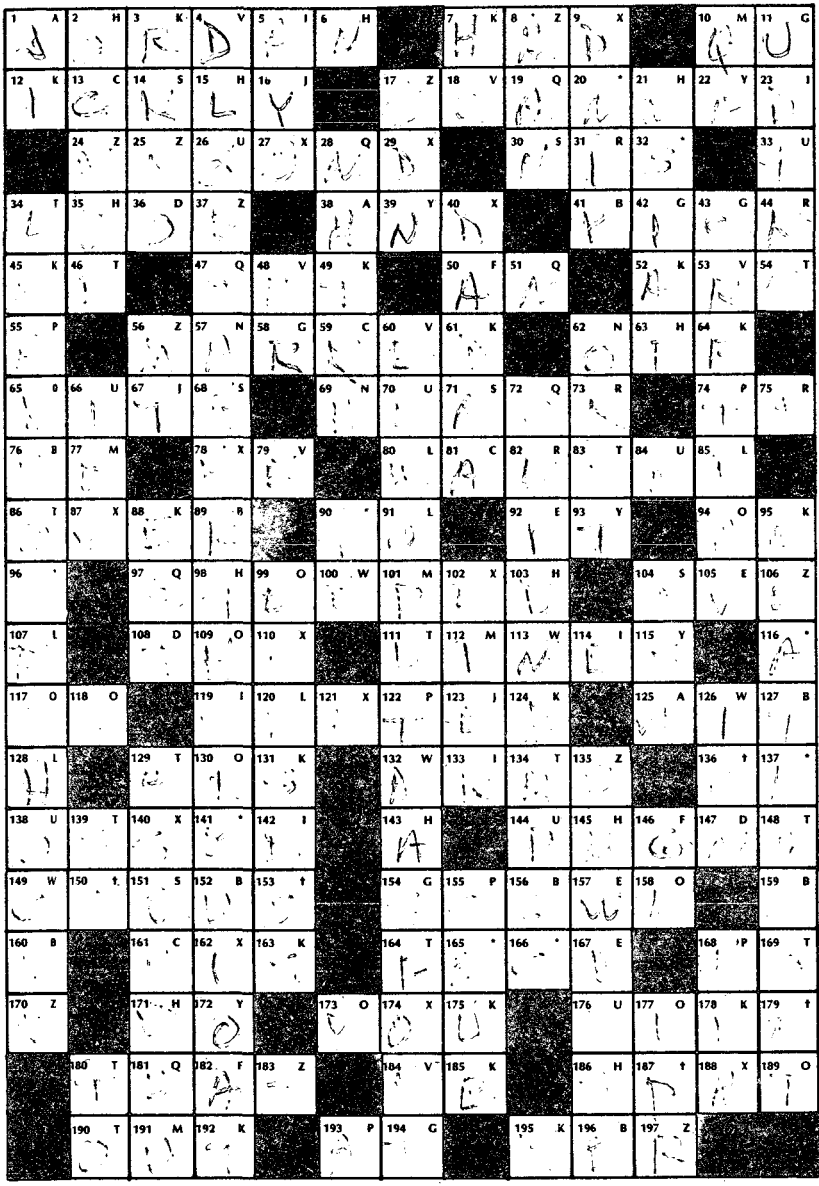

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Acrostic Puzzle

by Rachel Cosgrove Payes

This puzzle contains a quotation from a science fiction story. First, guess the clues and write the word in the numbered blanks beside the clues. Put these letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of the line is not necessarily the end of a word. Words end with black squares.) If your clue words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. If you can guess some of these words, put the letters into the blanks for the clues, over the appropriate numbers. This will help to guess more words. The first letters of the correctly worked clues spell the name of the author and the title of the sf work from which the quotation is taken.

A. Bony oral framework
1 38 125

B. Appropriate.
156 76 41 159 89 127 152 160 196

C. No sf writer wants to be one.
161 81 13 59

D. "To Go _____ Gently", Logsdon's novella.
147 36 108

E. "_____ from a Height", by Joan Vinge.
105 92 167 157

F. Cooker or Khan.
182 146 50

G. Gaping mouth.
58 42 43 194 11 154

H. Phyllis Eisenstein story (three words).
15 35 186 98 143 21 171 63 2 145
6 103

I. "The Redword _____ Papers," Davidson.
114 23 119 5 133 142

J. "The Best Is _____ To Be," Lucie Chin.
16 123 67

K. Cherryh's entry, (four words).
192 7 88 64 52 124 185 61 131 175
95 178 45 163 3 12 49 195

L. Conan's creator.
128 91 80 120 107 85

M. Outfit.
77 10 191 112 101

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N. A constricting entity.

69 62 57

O. "The _____ _____ _____" Donaldson's F&SF novelet (three words).

158 94 118 173 130 117 65 109 177 189

99

P. Fasten.

55 122 74 193 155 168

Q. "_____ Perpetuelle," Disch.

72 181 19 51 97 47 28

R. Nebula contender.

44 75 82 73 31

S. Waterpipe.

68 151 104 14 71 30

T. Bishop novella (four words).

86 34 46 164 190 111 83 139 148 180

129 169 134 54

U. Another card from Orson's deck.

176 66 33 84 70 138 26 144

V. Outwitted.

60 48 18 184 53 79 4

W. Special kind of button.

100 132 113 136 149

X. Lee Killough story

188 78 174 27 140 110 29 121 87 162

40 102 9

Y. Bryant's rock.

115 93 172 39 22

Z. Analog's repeat performance.

17 183 8 25 135 170 24 197 56 106

37

† What sword and sorcery novels are.

179 187 150 136 153

* Winning terpsichorean entertainment.

32 90 116 137 96 165 20 166 141

Answer will appear in the August issue.

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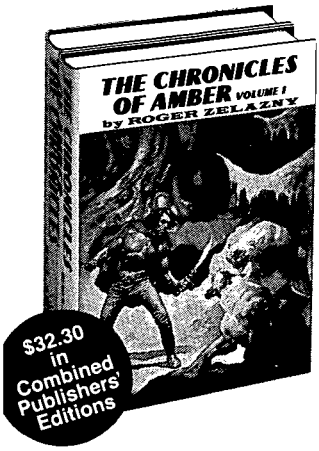

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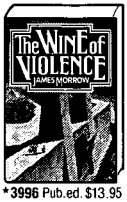

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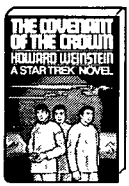

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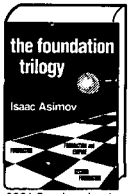

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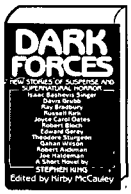

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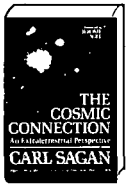

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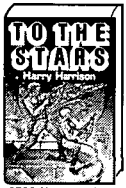

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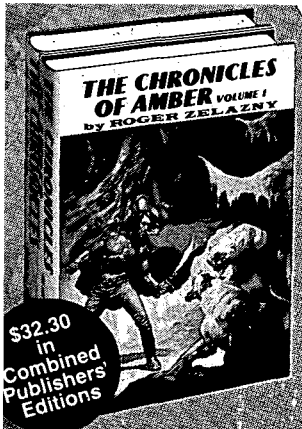

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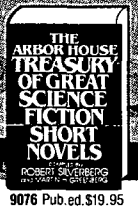

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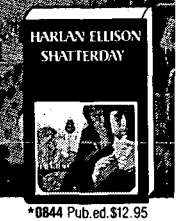

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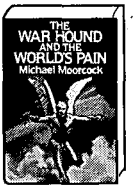

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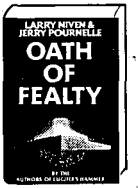

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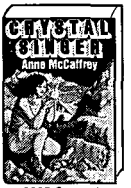

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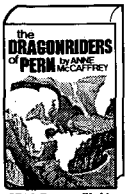

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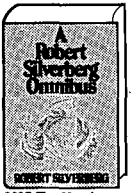

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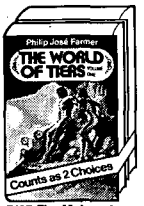

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